



Chapter 15

Oral Traditions

Oral traditions are recollections of the past that are commonly or universally known in a given culture; they include folktales, proverbs, riddles, praise songs or shouts, performances, origin narratives, legends, poetry, music, myths, dirges, historical accounts, trickster narratives, tall tales, and other stories. Some scholars distinguish between oral history and oral tradition using *oral history* to refer to 'the study of the recent past by means of life histories or personal recollections, where informants speak about their own experiences' (Henige 1982:2; see Sitton, Mehaffy and Davis, Jr. 1983 for aid in collecting oral histories). Vansina defines oral traditions 'as verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation' (Vansina 1985:26). They are transmitted verbally over at least one generation. Over time oral histories may develop into oral traditions.

Vansina points out that the term oral tradition applies both to the process and its product (1985:3). Frequently the process is stylized. For example,

When a Bajju storyteller begins his session, he uses the formulaic saying (as translated into English),

'All eyes are in front, all eyes are in back . . . It's a folk tale.'

Anthropologists, folklorists, oral historians, missiologists, and linguists all collect oral traditions. Investigation from several disciplinary perspectives allows researchers to bring the strengths of each discipline to their analyses.

Oral traditions exist in people's minds and are accessible only when heard at a moment in time. They are not immediately accessible, except within people's memories. For centuries memories have served as faithful repositories of oral traditions, as, for example, about origins of people, explanations of why things are as they are, and how things should be done. They are selective in the material remembered and transmitted over time, and some undergo modification according to what is important to succeeding generations.

In predominantly oral societies traditional education consists of information transmitted verbally from one generation to the next one. The elders are the repositories of such knowledge. A proverb from the Ngambay in Chad illumines this when it compares an elder to a library, so that at his death people may assert, 'A library has burned' (Sem Baesnel, Personal communication, 1990). Baesnel shared this proverb with my husband and me when my husband's father died and was buried on his ninety-fifth birthday.

Deng states the importance of traditional oral education as follows:

For reasons of its cultural, moral, and spiritual significance, the passing of knowledge down to successive generations is more than an objective transmission of facts . . . transmission of the actual words implies an educational process that is both informative and normative (Deng 1986:9).

In oral traditions the concept of the truths transmitted is fluid and dynamic. Concepts can change as the situation demands; by doing so the teller seeks to illuminate some aspect of morals, values, spiritual or

other objectives. Because oral traditions are oral and can be changed easily, they represent a dynamic approach to truth, one that takes into account the benefits of continued experiences.

Definitions of *culture* from the cognitive perspective relate directly to the collection of oral traditions. For example, Spradley and McCurdy define *culture* as 'the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and to generate behavior' (Spradley and McCurdy 1975:2).¹ According to this definition, fieldworkers must study oral traditions in order to obtain the knowledge that people have within their memories.

The collection and study of oral traditions are crucial for understanding essentially oral societies; they serve as the basis of much of the literature of literate societies. Moreover, events in both types of societies are the basis for the continued development of oral traditions.

In this chapter I discuss definitions of different types of oral traditions, then turn to their collection and analysis. I next discuss oral tradition and rhythm, oral traditions as social control and commentary, and the related topic of oral traditions in a political economy framework.

Types of Oral Traditions

The following brief definitions identify types of oral traditions. Overlap can occur between different types (e.g. between fables, legends, and myths); thus the types of oral tradition listed below are not mutually exclusive.

Dilemma Tales

Dilemma tales are tales that place the personae in positions with a dilemma or dilemmas to be solved. The clever solutions given often point up specific values within the culture. These tales seek answers to difficult questions.

Dirges

Dirges are songs used at funerals and memorial services. They can be used either at the burial that occurs immediately after death or several months or years following burial when the official funeral or memorial service takes place. For example, at a *kanak*, a ritual mourning feast that occurred several months after death, Bajju sang one dirge that asked the deceased, 'Where, where, where have you gone?'

Stone (1988:108) notes that the Akan in Ghana have funeral dirges that are without musical accompaniment. These are composed and performed during the public mourning phase of a funeral.

Epics

Epics are poetic narratives that typically contain numerous verses and usually weave a complex tale around a central person who engages in wonders and heroism (Vansina 1985:25). Epics may contain several varieties of oral tradition, such as formal speech, proverbs, songs, and myths. (See Biebuyck and Mateene 1969, for the epic Mwindo from the Congo; Biebuyck 1978, for a discussion of epics among the Banyanga in Zaire; and Blackburn, Claus, Flueckiger, and Wadley 1989, for oral epics in India.)

There are two components of an epic: length and poetic narrative. Further, epics exalt either an historical or legendary hero where the supernatural interrelates with the natural.

Within an African context, scholars have identified at least twenty epics (Kesteloot 1989:203). Kesteloot states that these epics fall into two categories, 'feudal' and 'clan' epics (Kesteloot 1989:204).

Feudal epics recount the exploits of an historical or legendary hero. They correspond to what scholars term 'Homeric' type epics within Greek epic studies. By contrast, clan epics

are always very long narratives punctuated by musical accompaniment and enumerating the valorous exploits of a heroic figure. By and large, however, they deviate far more from the history of the peoples that produce them. They take on a distinctly fantastical character. This supernatural aspect, often reduced to ordinary magical elements in the feudal epics, here reaches exaggerated, indeed surrealist proportions . . . (Kesteloot 1989:206).

An example of an African epic is the Kpelle *woi* epic in Liberia, which combines song, narration, dance, and dramatic performance, with musical accompaniment (Stone 1988). In this epic Stone notes shifting of themes, with seeming discontinuity between them. In some ways performance of the Kpelle epic may be compared to polyrhythmic patterns of African music, where each part has a relatively simple rhythm, but when all are combined the result is quite complex. Thus in an epic, time can be viewed as multidimensional with multiple layers, with use of space, motion, and telescoped time (e.g. the past enters into the present). The *woi* epic also incorporates *biographical time*, with each participant in the epic having an individual trajectory from birth to death, and even into ancestorship (Stone 1988:130).

The mythical founding hero often represents the aspirations of the clan. An example of an African feudal epic is the well known Mandinka epic of Sundiata (Niane 1965) that tells of the founding of the Mali empire in the 14th and 15th centuries. Feudal epics provide a mine of data for historical reconstruction for particular societies.

African epics often begin slowly, purposefully, and expansively, and end abruptly, sometimes with a single phase or word.

Fables

Fables are short fictional stories, frequently with morals; these stories often include animals or inanimate objects as characters. They may explain how things came to be as they are. For example, one Bajju narrative explains how the turtle got a cracked shell, and a Hausa narrative explains how the hyena got spots (see Johnston 1966:45-46).

Folktales

Folktales are stories or legends of real or imaginary events which are handed down over time; they have also been termed *fairy tales*. Some folktales are told simply to amuse, others teach moral principles, some present tragedies, and others highlight a contrast between right and wrong with resultant rewards or penalties. Some have a number of motifs that recur, and such repetitions give the tales their rhythm and allow hearers to anticipate what is coming next.

Founding Charters or Origins Narratives

Founding charters or *origins narratives* relate the origins of particular people or ethnic groups. Such charters continue to have significance for contemporary people by accounting for their distinctiveness and existence as a separate people. Origins narratives point people to the customs prescribed by their ancestors or the 'first people,' and they provide direction for behavior.

Historical Accounts

Historical accounts or *quasi-historical accounts* refer to narratives about actual events. For example, Johnston recorded 'The Death of Captain Moloney' as narrated to him by a Hausa who witnessed the event (Johnston 1966:153-157). Historians use oral accounts as one resource for reconstruction of history.

Legends or Etiological Tales

Legends explain why things are as they are, and they may include moral teachings or sanctions. They may be told mainly for entertainment. Sometimes these oral traditions are termed *etiological tales* in that they seek to explain the origins of natural phenomena and/or local customs.

Sometimes specific places or themes recur in legends. For example, for the Hausa in the well-known legend of Daura the well is an important place around which the events in the legend occur; similarly, for other West Africans, wells often have a central place in their legends as a focus of village life. Another place commonly found in legends are paths or roads that people travel along as events occur.

Legends frequently develop around real people who did things that members of the culture might want to emulate and/or value. For example, according to legend George Washington admitted to having cut down a cherry tree because he refused to lie about it. From government records we know that Washington was an historical figure. In this legend he is used to symbolize honesty, though we do not know for a fact that he either cut down a cherry tree or admitted to having done so.

Music

Music involves the art of combining sounds with various pitches to produce compositions. It can be approached from two perspectives: music as culture and music as an acoustical phenomenon. While some may lack adequate training in the technical aspects of the transcription of the acoustics of music, this should not deter cultural researchers from its study from the perspective of music as culture.

Ethnomusicologists specialize in the study of *music* in its cultural setting (See Chenoweth 1972; Nettl 1967; Titon, et. al. 1984; and the journal *Ethnomusicology*). In the study of music the fieldworker can investigate the question as to whether there is one word for 'music' or multiple words, each of which depicts a different type of music and its performance (e.g. drumming, singing, flute-playing, and horn-blowing). Study of the verbal content of music goes hand-in-hand with study of instruments (for example, the study of drums, rattles, flutes, horns, xylophones, stringed instruments, calabashes, etc.) which accompany music.

There are four major categories to the description of music. These are melody, rhythm, timbre, and overall structure (e.g. call and response, or a cyclical pattern).

In vocal music the musician may use different voice qualities to differentiate characters or their moods. The richness of music may be expressed through synchronization of voices as each part blends together.

Myths

Myths are sacred stories, with no evaluation made or implied as to their truth value; myths tend to explain why things are as they are. They usually deal with humans' relations to nature and to the supernatural. They are usually tied to the central belief structure of the religious or ideological system of the culture. *Cosmological myths* deal the origins of the heavens and its celestial bodies.

The term myth as used colloquially refers to that which is false. The anthropological use of this term meaning a sacred story may or may not coincide with that which is true or false.

Oracles

Oracles are divine revelations, utterances, messages (verbal and/or nonverbal), or pronouncements, and they derive their authority based on the power behind the message. For example, in the Old

Testament the term oracle could be translated as 'the word of the Lord' (see Mal. 1:1, Zech. 9:1), and its authority derives from 'the Lord.' Individuals may receive the content of oracles in dreams or visions. Oracles often give directions which, if not followed, result in impending doom. Frequently those directions involve repentance, sacrifice, and a changed lifestyle. If followed, oracles offer hope.

Among the Igbo in Nigeria traditionally one important oracle was the Agbala Oracle (Achebe 1959:104-113), the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, that bound the people and their autonomous villages together. Traditionally, this ethnic group had no overarching political structure, but each village was governed by a council of elders. It was oracles that gave the people a sense of political and religious cohesion.

Performances

Oral traditions in *performances* encompass performers, styles of performance, settings, masks, costumes, props, and audiences. While oral traditions have ritual and didactic purposes, their function of entertainment should not be overlooked. Okpewho points out,

The moonlit square has for countless generations been the setting for songs and stories whose primary intent is more to entertain, it would seem, than to edify (Okpewho 1975:2).

In entertaining, the performer(s) and audience often interact, sometimes with the performer asking questions, chanting refrains, inserting appropriate sound effects, dancing, and acting out parts of the story, and the audience responding by singing the chorus, providing background music, inserting appropriate sounds, and cooperating with the performer(s). The art of the storyteller can be utilized in a dramatic performance. Vansina describes performance as it occurs in central Africa as follows:

A performer sits, often in the evening, surrounded by listeners and spins a tale. It is never just a recitation. The voice is raised or lowered, used as a means of dramatization. Nor does the storyteller just sit there. The tale is acted out with body gestures, even when the storyteller is sitting. Sometimes he or she may stand up, move around, and mime parts of the action narrated. In most cases the public is not just watching. The public is active. It interacts with the teller, and the teller provokes this interaction by asking questions, welcoming exclamations, and turning to a song sung by all at appropriate points of the action. The teller and public are creating the tale together (Vansina 1985:34).

In the context of oral performances traditions are transmitted to the next generation. Within state societies there are specialists who transmit knowledge such as historical accounts, epics of the state, and genealogies of rulers. Sons listen at performances and learn the important oral traditions that they in turn pass down to their sons.

Performances of oral traditions are limited, with some used only for specific ritual occasions, such as at installations of new rulers, funerals, or other ceremonies. These uses indicate that oral traditions have practical purposes. Vansina makes this point,

Each sort of tradition has its appropriate occasions for performance, and that also determines the frequency of a performance. Among the Dogon (Mali), the Sigui ritual was performed, it is said, only once every sixty years. One wonders who after such a lapse of time would still remember the details and order of the complex rituals and, indeed, in the absence of a calendar how one knows exactly when to perform them (Vansina 1985:40).

The masks and costumes of masquerades are an essential part of the performance of the Dogon, as is true for other oral performances. Hence, collection of data on oral traditions includes gathering data on these aspects of the performance.

Poetry

Oral *poetry* consists of the composition of oral traditions in verse form and its performance.

Praise Songs or Praise Shouts

Praise songs or *praise shouts* performed by praise singers extol the virtues and sometimes the vices of important personages within society; praise singers or shouters receive money from those whose virtues they laud. For example, Hanns Vischer, the first Director of Education in Northern Nigeria, received the label of *Dan Hausa* (lit. the son of Hausa or a Hausa man) and was extolled in Hausa praise songs (Smith 1957). Emirs (lit. chiefs or kings) may employ full-time praise singers who accompany them to official occasions to extol their virtues in song for all to hear.

In Hausa culture different kinds of praise singers/praise shouters and musicians are lumped together as professional acclaimers (*marok'a*). People so termed have low status among the Hausa (Ames 1973:132) and tend to marry endogamously within the category of professional acclaimers.

Proverbs

Proverbs (also termed adages, maxims, and aphorisms) are short sayings that embody some recognized truth or thought, often having moral didactic purposes for their use. The language of proverbs is often metaphorical and symbolic. In proverbs, animals may be used symbolically to indicate some value or possible happening (e.g. among the Bajju and other ethnic groups in West Africa the owl symbolizes death and bad news, and the bush fowl symbolizes wisdom).

Yankah (1989), who studies Akan proverbs in Ghana, portrays the proverb as a dynamic communicative strategy in which form, meaning, and logic are in constant flux. Proverbs may focus on the absurd, or the antithesis (e.g., the English proverb 'marry in haste, repent at leisure'). They may reflect irony or involve understatement. Alternatively, proverbs may state paradoxes or ask rhetorical questions. Hyperbole (an intentional exaggeration that is not intended to be taken literally) is sometimes the essence of a proverb. Some folktales end in proverbs that express the central meaning or value of the story.

Riddles

Riddles are guessing games based on generalizations about experiences. They consist of two parts: the riddle and its answer. They often cause people to see connections between things that are not usually juxtaposed. Such games may be contests of wit. They are often used for entertainment purposes. Riddles may be expressed in riddling songs.

Songs

Songs are sung poetic compositions. Songs may occur within tales, sometimes with refrains repeated several times as the story unfolds. Song refrains may be key formulae within the story.

Svoboda (1985) collected Nuer songs that reflect the complex beauty of the culture. She states that song is an integral part of that culture in that 'someone is always singing in Nuerland' (Svoboda 1985:1). Song is their primary form of artistic expression. By song the Nuer preserve their history, transmit values and ideas, exchange contemporary points of view, and express dissent. Nuer also use songs to help their children go to sleep, to arouse warriors into battle, to encourage, to help in work, to attract lovers, and to praise or damn individuals (Svoboda 1985:2). Svoboda states,

The role of song in Nuer society is so powerful that if a woman sings with great eloquence that her husband beats her, she may be granted a divorce; if a young man objects in impassioned songs that his relatives take too long to negotiate a brideprice, he may speed up a sometimes years-long process. Song has even been used as evidence in a judicial hearing and may warrant a court injunction forbidding performance (Svoboda 1985:2).

Svoboda notes that the skill of a performer may increase a song's impact.

When studying a culture where song occupies such a central and integral position as among the Nuer and their neighbors the Dinka (see Deng 1972), collection of songs is essential for understanding the culture.

Songs may be divided into different types including war songs, operas, calypso, hymns, ballads, classical and traditional songs, lullabies, and so on. Modern types include 'high life' songs, rock and roll, country, bluegrass, and so forth. In gathering data on songs, the fieldworker may want to collect information on each type, though he or she may choose to focus on one or a few types of songs.

Tall Tales

Tall tales are also termed *lying tales*, with their essence being ridiculous exaggeration. Sometimes such tales revolve around contests between champions. For example, in Hausa tales a common key participant is a *sarki* or 'chief.' Other participants in Hausa tales may be designated as 'husband,' 'wife,' 'mother-in-law' (who is often portrayed negatively), '*mallam*' (teacher), 'thief,' or individuals indicated by occupation (e.g. 'grass-cutter,' 'tailor,' 'blacksmith,' 'hunter').

Trickster Narratives

In a *trickster narrative* the leading character (or characters) or *folk hero* is both an endearing one and a pathetic figure. He may seek to fool everyone, but often ends up fooling only himself. In some tales the trickster is the hero who is cunning, resourceful, malevolent, and ruthless. Perhaps the trickster's appeal is that he represents something that is in all humans. In most trickster narratives the hero himself is an animal and mostly relates to other animals.

The Asante and the Chumburung in Ghana as well as the Azande in Sudan have tricksters (*Ananse* (alt. *Anansi*) for the Asante and *Ture* for the Azande) who are both spider and man.

Ture is a monster of depravity: liar, cheat, lecher, murderer; vain, greedy, treacherous, ungrateful, a poltroon, a braggart. This utterly selfish person is everything against which Azande warn their children most strongly. Yet he is the hero of their stories, and it is to their children that his exploits are related and he is presented, with very little moralizing--if as a rogue, as an engaging one. For there is another side to his character, which even to us is appealing: his whimsical fooling, recklessness, impetuosity, puckish irresponsibility, his childish desire to show how clever he is, his total absorption in song and dance, his feathered hat, and his flouting of every convention. In spite of his nefarious conduct he is never really malicious. Indeed he has an endearing innocence. One is sorry for him when his cocksureness gets him in trouble, when he overreaches himself and sheds frustrated tears. Then he is pathetic He is indomitable. In spite of every failure, misfortune, and humiliation he perseveres (Evans-Pritchard 1967:28-29).

Evans-Pritchard translated *ture* as a human, though the word itself translates as 'spider.' Reasons for translating *ture* as human include his having human characteristics and the use of the human personal pronoun *ko* rather than the animal pronoun *u* (Evans-Pritchard 1967:23). Evans-Pritchard also points out that within the same story the pronominal reference can switch from human to animal and back again

depending on whether human or animal characteristics are in focus (1967:26). This dual nature of the leading character exists in other Azande narratives (e.g. one narrative begins with 'There was a man called Leopard,' and another with 'There was a man called Vulture,' see Evans-Pritchard 1967:26).

Frequently in African literature the trickster is represented by a human, an animal or insect such as a spider (e.g. *anansi* among the Akan in Ghana, see Rattray 1930), a turtle, a ground squirrel, a hare, a gazelle, or a jackal. Sometimes several animals appear, each with different characteristics. For example,

The Hausas . . . endowed the three heroes with recognizably different qualities. All three are tricksters, of course, but in the Hausa tales the spider is unscrupulous and vindictive, the rabbit gay and mischievous, and the jackal cunning and yet sagacious (Johnston 1966:xliv).

In Hausa narrative the victims of the trickster are often represented as animals, ogres, or persons (e.g. simpletons, lepers, the blind). For example, the hyena is depicted as a greedy stupid bully, who is overbearing to those he perceives as inferior to himself and subservient to those who are his superiors (Johnston 1966:xliv).

Basso (1987) described trickster narratives for the Kalapalo, a Carib speaking group of central Brazil, in which the trickster appears in accounts ranging from creation narratives to off-color stories. As such the trickster explores the ambiguities of human experience.

Suggestions for Collecting Oral Traditions

Fieldworkers most effectively engage in the collection of oral traditions and oral history within the context of participant observation. Collection of some oral traditions involves extensive interviews with specialists within the culture, while collection of many others involves attending specific performances where they are recited, danced, performed, and acted out. It is through being actively involved with members of the research community that the fieldworker learns the role of oral traditions within that culture and begins to understand their meanings. He or she is with the people when they are performed, as for example, in the evenings around the fire when the elders share oral traditions with the younger members of society.

Fieldworkers collecting oral traditions often use tape recorders and video cameras. These are aids in the recording of traditions for subsequent transcription and translation of texts, and their analyses. If analyzing oral traditions for historical content, researchers find it helpful to collect oral traditions from several sources to cross-check them for accuracy and detail. Fieldworkers should seek out the expert performers and attend their performances.

In collecting oral traditions researchers need to note who is involved in telling each type of oral tradition. Are there specific hereditary roles of tellers of oral traditions? For example, does the role of praise singer pass from father to son? How are specific verbal skills transmitted? Some types of oral traditions are the province of men while others are told by women, and some are told by anyone regardless of sex. For example, among the Hausa traditions (*labari*) are the domain of men (Skinner 1968:88). The fieldworker needs to record such data carefully.

Other questions about collecting oral traditions which a fieldworker might want to explore and record data about include the following:

1. Who are the performers? What are their ages, sexes, and occupations?
2. Is the position of transmitter of oral traditions acquired by inheritance? By personal acquisition? By apprenticeship? By both inheritance and

apprenticeship? If by apprenticeship, how long is that apprenticeship and what is the content of it? What does the master receive from his apprentice and what does the apprentice do for and receive from his master?

3. How is knowledge of oral traditions transmitted?
4. How are oral traditions learned?
5. In what contexts are oral traditions recited? Courts? Weddings? Funerals? Special festivals? Homes? Feasts? Rituals?
6. Who are the usual audiences for specific types of oral performances? Are some people prohibited from attending?
7. What, if any, interaction occurs between the oral performer(s) and audience? Does the audience participate and, if so, how?
8. What function(s) does the performance have?
9. What clothes (costumes) are specific to the performance?
10. What symbolism is involved in the oral tradition and its performance, and is that symbolism in the text?
11. What status do oral performers have, and is that status inherited, as for example, together with inheritance of occupation through one's father or mother?
12. What remuneration do performers receive? Who provides it?
13. In what ways are current cultural events being incorporated into oral traditions?
14. How do members of the audience interpret the performance and does their perspective coincide with that of the performer(s)? If the interpretation of audience and performers differs, how does it and why?
15. What factors contribute to a 'good' performance as assessed by performers, audience, and/or other members of the ethnic group?
16. What does the oral tradition and its performance tell about other parts of the culture, including its values and its worldview?
17. Is performance of oral traditions considered to be a craft, such as glass blowing, weaving, or leatherworking are classified?
18. Are performers organized, and if so, how are they organized? Do the musicians/transmitters of oral traditions have leaders or chiefs; what are their roles; and what functions do they have relative to the other performers and the audience?
19. Is performing a full-time or part-time occupation? For example, among the Hausa more than 80% of 153 musicians sampled by Ames derived all of their livelihood from their work as musical performers (Ames 1973:130-131).
20. What types of oral performers are there, and what is each type's specialty?
21. Do those who perform music differ from oral historians and other performers of oral traditions?
22. Are oral performers part of a professional specialists class? Do members of this class marry endogamously? (E.g. would a woman or her father want her to marry a praise singer or other oral performer?)
23. Is there a link between magical and/or medicinal use of oral traditions and other parts of the culture?
24. What roles do performers have in public life? For example, do musicians, performers or oral traditionists serve roles relative to the ruling aristocracy, modern political parties, etc.?
25. Are performers itinerant? Are they associated with specific families, castes, or classes (e.g. the aristocracy, chiefs)? Do they also provide services to the settled population (e.g. some peripatetic groups in India provide services as barbers, midwives, and abortionists)? If they are itinerant, what is their attitude towards the settled populace and that group's attitude towards the peripatetic group?
26. Do performers regularly have practice sessions? What penalty, if any, is assessed on a performer who does not attend a practice or who is consistently late for one? Who directs the practice?

The above list is only suggestive of data to collect. In order to gather some oral traditions, such as proverbs, fieldworkers need to record them as they occur in everyday speech, as well as from those who are knowledgeable in the culture on these topics. In many cultures there are specialists who know the origins narrative, the folktales including trickster narratives, and so on. Tape record such narratives, then transcribe them with a regular cultural assistant. To transcribe performances at the time they occur would interrupt them. Further, transcription is time consuming. Transcription should include morpheme by morpheme glosses as well as free translations.

Suggestions for Studying Music

The study of music as culture is particularly important for those who desire to learn about a culture through the collection of texts for linguistic analysis. Nketia and DjeDje state, 'It is generally believed that drum language and song texts should be approached from a linguistic point of view' (1984:xvii). While linguistics is important for study of music in general, it comes to the front in the analysis of the use of talking drums that transmit messages through use of the tones of the language, and whistle talk that similarly utilizes emic tone. Linguists, cultural researchers, and ethnomusicologists all can profitably bring the strengths of their disciplines to bear on the study of music

In studying music fieldworkers collect data on music and performers. Some field researchers become scholar performers, as, for example, Chernoff who spent ten years in Ghana studying drumming (Chernoff 1979).

Questions that might guide a fieldworker in the study of music include the following: Are the performers professionals (people who make music their primary source of income) or non-professionals (people who have other professions and perform music as a secondary source of income)? Are they full-time or part-time? What is each performer's part in the performance? Other questions that a fieldworker studying music might choose to investigate include:

1. What types of music are performed and by whom? Are there women's songs and/or instruments, and similarly, are there men's songs and/or instruments?
2. What music is performed with which rituals? What is the function of specific types of music within each ritual? E.g. some songs are *life cycle music*; these songs are associated with birth, initiation, betrothal, marriage, and death. Are there songs associated with different organizations (e.g. the *poro* men's secret organization or the *sande* women's secret organization in Liberia)?
3. What songs, instruments, and types of music (e.g. chants, hymns, or signature songs for specific spirits) are associated with specific religions and religious rituals? These songs are *religious music*; this category includes the subcategory of *church music*.
4. Are there songs used mainly for recreational purposes, songs that we might term *traditional recreational music*? Are some of them associated with specific kinds of recreational activity?
5. What music is associated with different occupations (e.g. music used by farmers, blacksmiths, butchers, hunters, etc.)? In what contexts are they used? For example, are there songs to accompany clearing of the bush, farming, or harvesting? Songs associated with specific occupations are termed *occupational music*.
6. Are there songs associated with the center of power, as for example, court songs, political party songs, national songs and anthems, etc.? Songs associated with political events are termed *music of political institutions*. Within this broad category are *praise songs*.
7. Are musicians organized and, if so, how? Is there a leader or chief of the musicians?

8. How does a person become a musician? Does a musician acquire that role by inheritance, apprenticeship, personal acquisition, by some combination of inheritance, apprenticeship and personal acquisition, or by some other means?
9. Are music and specific musical instruments incorporated into the oral history of the people? If so, what role do they have in that history and what is their relevance for people today? What can be deduced concerning historical events and reconstruction of history based on music about the past?
10. Is music incorporating innovations? Are changes in the musical system itself occurring? What are the changes?
11. Are new instruments being incorporated into the current repertoire of instruments and/or replacing or substituting for older types?
12. What different types of musical styles are present? In what contexts are each used?
13. Are songs improvised, and, if so, how are they improvised, by whom, and for what purpose(s)?
14. Are lyrics of songs fixed such that no improvisation occurs?
15. Are there regional and local musical traditions? What characterizes each?
16. Who are the primary musical composers?
17. What relationship exists between different types of music and dance?
18. Do the instruments have spirits of the instruments associated with them? If so, how is each spirit acknowledged or thanked in performance?
19. How does music contribute to harmonious social relations within that culture?
20. If the culture has stringed instruments, do different strings have different characteristics (e.g. the lowest string for the *bokotoko* harp in Chad is known as an 'elephant scream' (DeVale 1984:313))? Similarly, if a culture has a number types of drums, how is each characterized? Are kinship categories applied to different musical instruments?

Songs and other musical performances are often *event songs*. It is frequently possible to date specific songs based on the events described. While some songs are best described as event songs, some also serve as social protest songs or commentaries on current events. E.g. once during the civil war in Nigeria a group of teenage young women composed and performed a song about Gowon and Ojukwu, the leaders respectively of the Federal and Biafran sides of the conflict.

Videotaping Performances

Increasingly field researchers are videotaping performances. With permission they record the performers' words and songs in the local languages, then the fieldworker edits in subtitles for translation of the vernacular. By so doing, the people videotaped speak for themselves without the researcher's interpretations (except for the translation).

Following collection of oral traditions, fieldworkers analyze the data collected, including carefully defining terminology, constructs, and concepts used in their analyses.

Analyzing Oral Traditions

A first stage in analysis of oral traditions is to enter them into a database such that the researcher can access them rapidly and efficiently. For example, use a program such as FIESTA (Alsop and Johnston 1990), an acronym for Fast Interactive Editor of Scripture and Text Analysis, for rapid viewing, searching, comparing, and editing of documents.

Analysis of oral traditions can be from several perspectives: as historical record, as text, as metaphor, as verbal art, as oral performance, and as a means of social control and commentary. When viewing oral traditions as historical record, historians assess their reliability as valid sources of history.

Some anthropologists and folklorists speak of oral traditions as 'myths,' and question the extent to which these traditions reflect actual events. For example, Lowie stated, '... I cannot attach to oral traditions any historical value under any conditions whatsoever' (Lowie 1915:598). He felt that the oral traditions he collected among the Crow and Hidatsa failed to portray facts objectively (1917:163). He noted that in some oral traditions historical fact and non-fact or myth blend. An example of this comes from the Bajju where,

In some versions of the Bajju origins narrative the people of Sokwak are the descendants of Ankwak, the eldest son of the Bajju founding father Baranzan. By contrast, in one version the people of Sokwak allegedly emerged from a termite mound.

However, increasingly fieldworkers do place importance on oral traditions as reflections of history from the point of view of those who hold them.

Oral Traditions as Historical Record

Collecting *oral historical traditions* is a means of probing into the past of a particular people, including both the recent and more distant past. Collection and subsequent analysis of them need to be supported by other types of research, especially consultation of written historical documents, including records in national archives, mission records, journals of early travelers, letters, books, and any other relevant documents.

In the study and analysis of oral historical traditions the fieldworker needs to understand reasons for people's behavior as well as reasons for preservation of specific oral traditions. Sometimes it helps if he or she is able imaginatively to place himself or herself in the position of those studied. A historical record is always incomplete, and sometimes the individuals who transmit such oral histories creatively add to them through the use of their imagination by filling in details likely to be consistent with the setting within which the event(s) occurred. As such, oral traditions are dynamic and reflect historical truths as relevant for those who tell them.

Some cultures have individuals who preserve the official version of the history of a particular people. For example, *griots* are professional praise singers in West Africa who preserve historical accounts, epics, and poetry. A *griot* combines the functions of a minstrel, jester, herald, annalist, troubadour, gleeman, and poet (Pickett, in Niane 1965:ix). The position of *griot* passes down through the clan of praise singers. Vansina describes the position and function of a praise singer among the Yoruba as follows:

In states, an official was often found whose duty was to perform the state's official history at public ceremonies. Thus the *baba elegun* of Ketu, a Yoruba (Rep. Benin) city[,] had to know the city's history. The official was hereditary in the Oyede family and the information was passed from father to son. The traditions were recited at each enthronement. If the *baba elegun* succeeded on that occasion to recite the traditions without mistake, he was offered a reward. If he failed, he was deemed to be punished by supernatural sanction. Such a man was a walking reference library, to be used when state occasion demanded it (Vansina 1985:37).

Analyzing Oral Historical Traditions

A basic issue that researchers face is the interpretation of oral historical traditions collected, including their historicity. Analysis of an oral historical tradition involves translating it, dating it, understanding its metaphors, and sometimes resolving differences between its several forms.

Translation

Translating oral traditions consists of more than translation of lexical items; it involves understanding something of the richness both of that which is denoted and that which is connoted. Sometimes translation of the whole adds up to something other than the sum of the surface lexical meanings of the parts. For example,

While my husband, daughters, and I were attending a Cherubim and Seraphim church, people began dancing towards the back of the church, and my husband indicated that we should too. I asked my husband what we were doing. He said that the man next to him told him that we were going 'to pour water.' Both of us had not a clue as to what that idiom meant in this context though we knew the meaning of each lexical item. We soon found out that we were dancing to a tray located at the back of the church where we gave our offering. In this context 'pouring water' meant to give our offering; it did not mean to urinate, though the phrase 'to pour water' does mean that in other contexts.

Translation includes morpheme by morpheme glosses as well as more idiomatic translation of the text. Text with such careful translation can be used not only for establishing the historical context, but also for discourse analysis of the text itself.

Dating

Since many oral cultures are *event oriented* rather than *time oriented*, establishing a chronology of events in oral narratives may be problematic. One dictum for writing history for some historians is that no history exists without chronology. Establishing chronology when working with oral narratives may call for creative methods. While *absolute dating* may not be possible, establishment of *relative dating* may be. For example, events mentioned within the tradition can at times be placed within a relative time span based on events in the narrative.

One process which occurs in oral narratives, especially within genealogies, is *telescoping*; this involves shortening or omitting entire portions of the society's past. The portion most commonly omitted is that between a society's recent past and the time of its origins. Different oral traditions insert the gap between the recent past and the time of origins at different places; consequently Vansina refers to this as a *floating gap* (Vansina 1985:24). The fact that telescoping occurs does not mean that the narrative has no historical reliability.

Sometimes narratives have three tiers: a period of myth in the timeless past, a repetitive (cyclical) middle period, and lineal time (Vansina 1985:23). These tiers may have different functions for the society. For example, the mythical past may serve as the justification for society itself, including the existence of people, plants, and animals, and the hows and whys of things as they are (see Griaule 1965 for an example of the Dogon mythical past). The repetitive cyclical middle period may serve to explain the early period of specific societies. The lineal time is more apt to reflect history as it has occurred and may be documented from historical records.

Non-calendar keeping societies have several main sources of chronological detail: *genealogies* (e.g. the Fang in Gabon have genealogies that extend fifteen or more generations (Fernandez 1982:67)), calculations by relative age of respondents, *recurrent social events* (e.g. age grade initiations, markets, chieftaincy celebrations), datable astronomical and natural phenomena termed *ecological time* (e.g. comets,

eclipses, earthquakes, droughts and resultant famines, epidemics, locust invasions), wars, and archaeological dating. Estimates of time depth in genealogies can be based on some approximate average number of years per generation such as 25, 30, or 35 years, though as Henige notes 'it is questionable whether any average really ought to be applied to a particular genealogy or list of officeholders . . . ' (Henige 1982:97-98).

Sometimes the only date and place that can be attached to a tradition is that of its performance. Unless it was composed within the memory or knowledge of living members of the society, researchers may not be able to date its composition.

Mutations

Researchers may find themselves tempted to look for *the* correct version of a particular oral tradition, with resultant frustration when each person they ask to recite that tradition gives a slightly different version. Johnston, who collected Hausa oral traditions, recognized this as follows,

It has sometimes been supposed that each folk-tale possesses an authentic version which must at all costs be reverently preserved. This is of course a myth. As the stories had no known author, and were never committed to writing until the early part of this century, they tended to have as many variants as raconteurs (Johnston 1966:xliv).

Johnston continues by making the point that it is amazing that there is as much uniformity or agreement in oral traditions as does exist (Johnston 1966:xliv). When a storyteller recounts a specific oral tradition, his or her goal may not be to recite one faithful version but rather to use the oral tradition for pragmatic purposes, whether to entertain or to teach social norms or to make a specific point. Though frequency of repetition of a tale aids storytellers in remembering details, it does not guarantee its faithful recounting. The intent of the storyteller at a particular performance may have much to do with the details of the version told.

Further, members of different societies place greater or lesser importance on faithfully reciting a particular oral tradition. Vansina notes,

In Polynesia ritual sanctions were brought to bear in case of failure to be word-perfect. When bystanders perceived a mistake the ceremony was abandoned. In New Zealand it was believed that a single mistake in performance was enough to strike the performer dead. Similar sanctions were found in Hawaii. This implied that when a performer was not struck dead his performance had to be correct. Such beliefs however had visible effects. Thus in Hawaii a hymn of 618 lines was recorded which was identical with a version collected on the neighboring island of Oahu (Vansina 1985:41-42).

While mutations of tales occur based on storytellers' intentions, sometimes different versions arise based on different perspectives of those who preserve the oral traditions. For example, Henige notes 'that Xhosa versions of these incidents [of transcultural expansion] differ in many respects from the accounts enshrined in colonial historiography' (Henige 1982:72).

Mutations of an oral tradition may occur when it is borrowed from another ethnic group. Oral traditions as well as other borrowings cross-culturally undergo modifications to fit their new cultural context.

Analyzing Founding Charters

Oral traditions about an early culture hero or heroes and the events surrounding the hero(es) serve as *founding charters* for cultures. They help explain migrations and migration routes, as well as the relationship between ethnic groups in the area. For example,

In the Bajju founding charter Baranzan moved from the Jos Plateau into Southern Zaria, where he found both good farm land and good hunting. He and his wife had several sons, each of whom founded a village; each village expanded and over time gave rise to a section of the Bajju ethnic group. His brother Atakat founded the Atakar people. Because of this close kinship relationship, traditionally the Bajju and Atakar did not intermarry.

Traditions form around an archetypical figure, the *culture hero*, who tends to embody the desired values of the society. He or she is used to explain what happened at an early cultural stage. Sometimes there is little evidence other than through such traditions that this culture hero existed historically; he or she is 'a character credited with conferring upon mankind special artifacts or institutions, or who has expressed the highest goals of a particular culture' (Crane and Angrosino 1974:107).

Kunene points out that culture heroes are humans rather than supernatural beings. He states,

The heroes are not superior beings except in so far as their earthly deeds make them so, least of all are they gods or descendants of gods. They do not possess supernatural powers, or do battle against other-worldly creatures such as monsters and demons. They do not go on adventures to worlds beyond that of man. Nor are they wont to provide lavish feasts in palatial mansions. In short, they are ordinary human beings engaged in ordinary human activities. Not seldom, however, the poet, in the vividness of his imagination, uses metaphor, imagery, and symbolism which transport these ordinary activities to a level of extraordinariness, and the hero is often described as fighting against monsters, or as being himself a monster or other terrible creature destroying his opponents. But this is never meant to be more than figurative (Kunene 1971:xvi, as quoted in Okpewho 1979:18).

The role of the culture hero continues to be important within society today. In African founding charters, culture heroes frequently serve as apical ancestors, with their sons founding villages and over time these villages becoming sections of ethnic groups. (See McKinney, C. 1985:51-59 for the Bajju founding charter; see Johnston 1966:111-112 for 'The Legend of Daura' on the founding of the Hausa.)

Recent historical events can be obtained from the study of life histories or personal recollections.

Reconstructing History

In the analysis of oral history taken from the study of life histories or personal recollections, the cultural researcher uses those data as a means of reconstructing history, an important area of cultural research since there are no people without history. Because the oral historian is interested in understanding specific events and historical processes, in collecting oral history he or she asks leading questions in order to find out what the interviewee knows about those events and their occurrences. This contrasts with the methodology of collecting life histories where the researcher allows the interviewee the freedom to select events that are important to him or her.

Since much of what researchers write about under the rubric of history concerns the activities of the elite, collection of oral historical traditions allows fieldworkers the opportunity to focus on the non-elite, the underprivileged, the poor, the oppressed, the losers in history, as well as the elite. Examples of this emphasis include recent research on slavery (e.g. the acquisition of slaves, slavery itself, and the lives of ex-slaves; see Lovejoy 1983). Sources for collection of oral history on slavery exist in some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly where governments abolished slavery within the memory of some elderly members of societies.

While study of oral traditions and oral histories are used to reconstruct past history, fieldworkers can also use the diachronic study of oral traditions to analyze the change process. Some scholars through

participant observation over a number of years work with primary material in which they can document changes in oral traditions. They see specific individuals taking actions, groups forming for oral performances, and the routinization and incorporation of those oral traditions into the culture. They are able to see the dynamics of culture change by a diachronic study of oral traditions. For example, Young documents the rise and decline of the Mama Chi revitalization movement in Panama (Young, lecture, summer 1987, Eugene, Oregon).

One issue that oral historians debate is the extent to which one can strip away the nonhistorical accretions and arrive at a central historical truth. For example, by collecting and analyzing multiple versions of the same event, can a fieldworker arrive at what really happened by extracting that which is the same in each version? However one answers that question, the task of reconstructing historical events and processes from oral historical traditions is difficult.

Oral Traditions as Text

When analyzing oral traditions as *text* or *discourse*, researchers have moved into the area of understanding the linguistic features of the language. Text analysis traces features such as the time line, the character line, the event line, the referential focus, background information, the plot, and the setting. These aspects of the text are then analyzed in terms of specific linguistic structures such as the use of cohesion, pronominal reference, topicalization (see McKinney, N. 1978; Crozier 1984), and tense and aspect. In text analysis researchers utilize various types of charting such as span charts, Thurman charts, and/or the Longacre-Levinsohn charts (see Peck 1984:309-314.) Fleming also has useful suggestions about text analysis including charting of data (Fleming 1988a, 1988b).

Knowing the nuances of the language contributes significantly and sometimes critically to understanding the meaning of the text of oral traditions. Some linguists have studied text analysis extensively and provide insightful guidance for their analysis (see Chafe, ed. 1980, Fleming 1988a, Fleming 1988b, Grimes 1975, Longacre 1983, Peck 1984, Pike and Pike 1982). Text (discourse) analysis is a major subfield within linguistics.

Ahmad in analyzing Hausa tales states that the underlying elements that recur in some folktales include 1) the initial situation, 2) motivations and causes of the characters, 3) the use of repetition, 4) the use of non-verbal elements (facial gestures, use of the body, etc.), 5) moral perception of the characters, and 6) variation according to audience (Ahmad 1989).

Oral Traditions as Metaphor

The American College Dictionary defines a *metaphor* as,

a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable, in order to suggest a resemblance (Barnhart, ed. 1947:765).

Metaphors can illuminate cultural presuppositions; and metaphors are so common in culture as to be almost ubiquitous. Vansina states concerning metaphor,

All art is metaphor and form. Verbal art, such as poetry, song, sayings, proverbs and tales conform to this rule. They express the experience of contemporary situations or events, morals to be drawn from such occurrences or situations or express intense emotions associated with them (Vansina 1985:11).

Culture may be viewed as representations, metaphors, images, or imaginations of the mind (Fernandez 1982:3). Different cultures use images or metaphors as means of representing different social realities, whether religious, social, political, material (e.g. village structure), or other components of a culture.

Fernandez, in writing about the Bwiti cult of the Fang in Gabon, describes his analysis as an anthropology of the religious imagination (1982:3). Through the Bwiti cult the Fang construct their own meaningful microcosm that turns away from modernizing influences and builds upon their traditional religious past as well as on Christianity. Some of the metaphors seem strange, yet within the Bwiti cult make sense. For example,

The harp represents the voice of the female object of devotion in Bwiti, Nyingwan Mebege, the sister of God who is syncretized with the Virgin (Fernandez 1982:4).

Religious cosmologies often are rich in metaphors. Griaule found that the religious metaphors described to him by Ogotemmel, a blind Dogon elder in Mali, used the village layout as a metaphor in describing Dogon cosmology to Griaule,

'The village,' said Ogotemmel, 'should extend from north to south like the body of a man lying on his back. Lower Ogol is almost correct. The head is the council house, built on the chief square, which is the symbol of the primal field.'

It appeared also, from the blind man's earlier explanations, that the village should be in the form of a square with one side facing north and the streets running from north to south and east to west

On the north side of the square is the smithy, as was that of bringer of civilization. To the east and west are houses for menstruating women; they are round like wombs and represent the hands of the village. The large family houses are its chest and belly; the communal altars at the south of the village are its feet.

The stones on which the fruit of the *Lannea acida* is crushed, placed in the centre of the village, represents its female sexual parts. Beside them should be set the foundation altar, which is its male sex organ; but out of respect for the women this altar is erected outside the walls (Griaule 1965:96-97).

In southeast Asia the widespread metaphorical use of a water buffalo occurs in marital negotiations. Gregerson reports that among the Rengao in the highlands of Vietnam the negotiating parties may refer to the bride as a water buffalo (Gregerson, 1991, personal communication, Dallas). Headland reports a similar use in the Philippines (Headland, 1991 personal communication, Dallas).

Oral Traditions as Symbol

Closely related to analysis of oral tradition as metaphor is analysis of the symbolic content within specific oral traditions. A word, phrase, or sentence may be used to represent something else, that which is hidden from the surface form of the oral tradition. For example, in the novel *The River Between* Ngugi (1967) uses a river as symbolic of the wide gap between the people who live on two mountains, people who are torn between the traditional and the new cultural and religious patterns coming to the area.

Oral Traditions as Art

Oral traditions when performed are *verbal art*, art as metaphor, image, and symbol. Just as sculptures, paintings, pottery, and other art forms cannot adequately be described in words, so too with verbal art which often involves performance. Therefore cultural researchers may choose to capture verbal art by use of tape recordings, photographs, videos, and/or motion pictures.

Performers use a formal language style for some verbal art, such as epics, whereas in other types of verbal art they use everyday language. Analyses of verbal art need to be done in terms of both its form and its content.

Oral Traditions and Rhythm

When analyzing the form of oral traditions, analyses need to include study of rhythm in texts. This involves analyzing the regularly patterned repetitions of syllables, words and phrases, the metrical structure of the text, and in general understanding the place that rhythm plays in specific oral traditions. Frequently oral traditions have rhyme schemes that the fieldworker can analyze to understand the rhythm. For example, calypso music has a range of rhythmic patterns that are identifiable. By contrast old high German music sung by the Amish tends to have a slow drawn out rhythm.

Schuh (Lecture, Dallas, 1987) analyzed the rhythms of Hausa songs as influenced by the introduction of Islam. He traced changing rhythmic patterns as the Hausa increasingly use the traditional rhythmic patterns of their pre-Islamic music, even when singing songs that are influenced by Islam.

Donnelly and Omar in analyzing Bajuni fishing songs from a northern Somali dialect wrote that songs usually have sixteen syllables in a line (Donnelly and Omar 1983:115). They note that 'The metrical structure is comparable to that associated with many other Swahili songs or poems . . . , but the Bajuni songs differ from the mainstream of Swahili poetry by their high frequency of nonmetrical devices such as parallelism, linking, lead-ons, puns, etc.' (Donnelly and Omar 1983:115).

Oral Traditions As Social Control and Commentary

Most societies utilize oral traditions as a means of entertainment, transmission of culture, and education in moral and social values; some societies have forms of oral traditions used specifically as means of *social control* and *commentary*.

Hungerford reports that among the Kera in Chad once a year the people perform *insult dances* and dramatizations (Hungerford, Personal Communication, Dallas, 1988). For example, she described a performance in which all the actors were men, even those who performed female roles. They enacted an event that had occurred within the previous year in which a man had stolen a goat at a market, then a week later came to sell the same goat at the same market and was caught doing so. Individuals, such as the goat stealer, who find themselves portrayed in such insult dramatizations, quickly learn the consequences of violating societal norms. Those who witness such dramatizations also learn social norms and values, and while doing so have a good time laughing at human follies.

Payne reports that in some ethnic groups in the Philippines people use ritual language in singing to resolve conflicts (Tom Payne, personal letter, July 1990). Such use of ritual language serves as conflict resolution, social control, and commentary.

G. Hansford (Personal letter, December 27, 1990) reports that among the Chumburung, a group in northern Ghana, at a funeral relatives of the deceased act out part of the job of the deceased. For example, if the deceased was a street trader, the people mimic his actions to make fun of him.

A further area to investigate is that of *gossip* to express disapproval of what people are doing that violates social norms. For example, Bajju speakers drop the register of their voices when talking about others in disapproval. In one instance I overheard two elderly women discuss how scandalous the marriages of some younger women were, in that there had been no exchange of money for the bridewealth. In that conversation each dropped the normal fundamental frequency of her voice, thus through gossip they signaled their disapproval.

Oral Traditions in a Political Economy Framework

A political economic analysis of oral traditions looks at them as indicators of inequality, and the means of maintenance of that inequality, aspects of power, and domination; political economic analyses may include such factors as inequality in gender, language usage, and expressive genre. For example, minority people who are at the periphery of the economic structure may use songs (including protest songs), poems, speeches, and conversations among other oral traditions to express their perspective on that peripheral status. Sometimes the perspective expressed in oral traditions of those who are powerless differs from official views expressed by the dominant people or classes.

In order to analyze the political economic context of oral traditions the analyst must take into account the linguistic structure, the propositional content, and the context of the performance of the oral traditions. This will enable the researcher to uncover the way(s) the group formulates their opposition to their situation of inequality and oppression.

While some oral traditions can be used as a means of expression of opposition to political inequality, powerlessness, and oppression, not all oral traditions are so used. When they are, however, it is important to analyze oral traditions that focus on inequality as means to openly challenge or subtly subvert dominant values and perspectives.

When analyzing some oral traditions from a political economic perspective, lexical items may be changed in such a way that they communicate with the in-group while excluding the out-group. For example, prisoners sometimes change the meaning of lexical items to communicate with each other while excluding their guards by use of slang, secretive codes, and ritual language. As an example, prisoners may term the main walkway 'Main Street' and the commissary 'Charlie's Place.' A second example concerns the perspective of women who stay at the Salvation Army, a place they may term 'Sally's Place' or simply 'Sally's'. Further, people can take the words of others and appropriate them for their own purposes.

The language or dialect used in specific contexts may also give information about cultural dominance. For example, which language is used in bilingual or multilingual contexts can reflect political inequality. Linguistic processes such as linguistic nationalism, pidginization, bilingualism, creolization, and language standardization often have a common focus on the economy, power, and dominance (Gal 1989:356). Study of such uses of oral traditions are undertaken in the context of good ethnographic research and careful descriptions and analyses of local social and linguistic processes.

Summary

Analysis of oral traditions often requires considerable knowledge of the culture, knowledge that has been gained through other methodologies such as participant observation and informal interviews. Their analyses involve knowledge of the relevant symbolism, such as the fact that in many West African cultures the sound of a owl at night signifies that someone will die soon, or that a bush fowl represents wisdom. Colors, too, may be symbolic in many cultures.

Oral traditions may be analyzed from various perspectives: as history, metaphor, text, verbal art, and performance. This chapter has dealt with each of these topics. Oral traditions are multivocal; they can be used for entertainment and amusement, for transmitting culture, for rationalizations of beliefs and attitudes, for didactic purposes to teach values, morals, and acceptable behavior, for social pressure and sanction for those who deviated from culturally acceptable behavior, for contests of wit, for explanations of cultural knowledge, for preservation of folk knowledge, and for protest of political inequality. Perhaps it is their multivocality that makes oral traditions so useful.

ASKING DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONS

Sheel Williams

OBJECTIVES

1. To conduct the first ethnographic interview
2. To understand the process of developing rapport with an informant
3. To collect a sample of an informant's speech by asking descriptive questions

Ethnographic interviewing involves two distinct but complementary processes: *developing rapport* and *eliciting information*. Rapport encourages informants to talk about their culture. Eliciting information fosters the development of rapport. In this step we will examine rapport and discuss the nature of ethnographic questions, particularly descriptive questions.

THE RAPPORT PROCESS

Rapport refers to a harmonious relationship between ethnographer and informant. It means that a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information. Both the ethnographer and the informant have positive feelings about the interviews, perhaps even enjoy them. However, rapport does not necessarily mean deep friendship or profound intimacy between two people. Just as respect can develop between two people who do not particularly like one another, rapport can exist in the absence of fondness and affection.

It is impossible to identify universal qualities that build rapport because harmonious relationships are culturally defined in every society. And so the ethnographer must pay particular attention to friendly relationships in each cultural scene to learn local, culture-bound features that build rapport. For example, when I interviewed Kwakiutl informants in British Columbia, I observed that friends and kinsmen sat together in long periods of silence. Although difficult, I learned to sit in silence and to converse more slowly. The rapport I gained through adopting these local patterns of interaction contributed to successful interviews. What follows regarding rapport must be taken as general suggestions. Some will work well within our own society in many cultural scenes; other suggestions must be modified to fit local cultural situations as well as the peculiarities of individual informants.

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Probably the only universal characteristic of rapport is that it changes and fluctuates over time. On first encounter a potential informant may appear eager and cooperative. During the first interview this same informant appears uncomfortable, anxious, and even defensive. A different informant, after several interviews conducted in a harmonious fashion, becomes suspicious and bored, even discontinuing further contact. Laura Bohannon, in her classic anthropological novel, *Return to Laughter*, graphically describes the fluctuating rapport she experienced with her informants. Yabo, an old man who showed initial antagonism, became the first informant to reveal the secrets of witchcraft. Kako, the chief, took the anthropologist into his homestead and expressed willingness to help from the start. However, circumstances changed and he soon refused to talk of anything significant, influencing others to ignore the anthropologist. Finally, this phase in the relationship passed and Kako again became a willing and helpful informant.

Although sometimes unpredictable, rapport frequently does develop in a patterned way. I want to suggest a model of the *rapport process* in ethnographic interviewing. This model will provide the beginning ethnographer with a kind of compass for recognizing when rapport is developing well and when it has wandered off course. It can provide a basis for identifying and correcting problems that arise in the ethnographer-informant relationship. The rapport process, in cases where it develops successfully, usually proceeds through the following stages:

APPREHENSION → EXPLORATION → COOPERATION → PARTICIPATION

I want to discuss these stages by focusing on the interaction that goes on during interviews. In doing this, however, we should not lose sight of the wider context of field work. Most ethnographers will conduct participant observation at the same time, thus encountering key informants when they are working, visiting friends, enjoying leisure time, and carrying out ordinary activities. These encounters contribute to rapport as much as, or more than, the encounters during actual interviews. Under such conditions, the relationship may move more quickly to full cooperation. However, rapport still goes through a sequence of stages. Many times an ethnographer may want to conduct interviews with people not encountered during participant observation; rapport can still develop in a positive manner.

Apprehension

Ethnographic interviews always begin with a sense of uncertainty, a feeling of *apprehension*. This is true for both experienced ethnographers and the beginner. Every time I contacted a tramp and asked if we could talk, I felt apprehensive and sensed that each potential informant had similar feelings. Sometimes apprehension is slight; at other times informants express deep anxiety and suspicion. I recall one tramp who seemed overly anxious. I

explained my purpose and began asking questions but received only brief, curt replies. I felt increasing discomfort and made further attempts to put my informant at ease. "Are you with the F.B.I.?" he finally blurted out. I assured him I was a professor at the nearby medical school and had no connection with the F.B.I. or the local police department. He made me promise that I would not divulge his name to anyone, that all his statements could only be used anonymously.

Such extreme apprehension is rare, but some degree of uncertainty starting with the first contact through one or two interviews is common. The informant doesn't know what to expect, doesn't really understand the purposes and motives of the ethnographer. Both researcher and informant are unsure how the other person will evaluate responses. Informants may fear that they will not meet the expectations of the ethnographer. They may comment: "I don't know if I know enough," or "I'm not sure I can really help you, maybe you ought to talk to someone else about this."

The realization that ethnographic interviews begin with some uncertainty in the relationship can help the beginning ethnographer relax and accept this fact. At the same time, several things can help move the interviews through the stage of apprehension. The most important thing is to get informants talking. As we shall see later in this step, *descriptive questions* are especially useful to start the conversation and keep an informant freely talking. It does not usually matter what a person talks about; it does matter that the informant does most of the talking during the first couple of interviews. When an informant talks, the ethnographer has an opportunity to listen, to show interest, and to respond in a nonjudgmental fashion. These kinds of responses represent the most effective way to reduce an informant's apprehension. They communicate acceptance and engender trust. One of the most important principles, then, for the first interviews is to *keep informants talking*.

Exploration

Apprehension usually gives way quickly to *exploration*. In this stage of the rapport process, both ethnographer and informant begin trying out the new relationship. Together they seek to discover what the other person is like, what the other person really wants from the relationship. Exploration is a time of listening, observing, and testing. What does he want me to say? Can she be trusted? Is she going to be able to answer my questions? What does she really want from these interviews? Am I answering questions as I should? Does he really want to know what I know? These questions often go unspoken but exist nonetheless.

Apprehension, the first stage, arises in part from simple unfamiliarity with the terrain of ethnographic interviews. Exploration is the natural process of becoming familiar with this new landscape. Although each party begins exploring immediately, there comes a point where they leave behind the

feelings of uncertainty and anxiety to enter the fullblown stage of exploration. It may occur when each laughs at something said, when the informant seems to go off on an interesting tangent, or when the ethnographer mentally sets aside prepared questions to talk about something. When a sense of sharing occurs, a moment of relaxation comes. Both can then begin to explore the territory with greater freedom.

Informants need the opportunity to move through the stage of exploration without the pressure to fully cooperate. It takes time to grasp the nature of ethnographic interviews. It takes time to see if the ethnographer's actions will match the explanation offered during the first interview. Valuable data can be collected during this stage if the ethnographer is willing to wait for full cooperation. During this stage a certain tenseness exists and both parties may find the interviews exhausting.

Three important principles facilitate the rapport-building process during this stage. First, *make repeated explanations*. A simple statement may suffice: "As I said earlier, I'm interested in finding out how you talk about things, how you see things. I want to understand things from your point of view." One dare not assume that informants appreciate the nature of ethnographic interviews based only on the first explanation. Repetition before each interview, during interviews, and at the end of each will pay great dividends.

Second, *restate what informants say*. Using this principle, the ethnographer selects key phrases and terms used by an informant and restates them. Restating in this fashion reinforces what has been said by way of explanation. Restating demonstrates an interest in learning the informant's language and culture. Here are three examples of restatements typical of my interviews with tramps:

1. "Then you would say, 'I made the bucket in Seattle.'"
2. "So, if a man was a trustee, he'd do easy time."
3. "Then I might hear another tramp saying, 'He's a bundle stiff.' Is that right?"

Restating embodies the nonjudgmental attitude which contributes directly to rapport. When the ethnographer restates what an informant says, a powerful, unstated message is communicated—"I understand what you're saying; I am learning; it is valuable to me." Restatement must be distinguished from reinterpreting, a process in which the interviewer states *in different words* what the other person said. Reinterpreting prompts informants to translate; restating prompts them to speak in their own ordinary, everyday language.

The third principle states, *don't ask for meaning, ask for use*. Beginning ethnographers often become overconcerned with meanings and motives. They tend to press informants with questions like, "What do you mean by

that?" and "Why would you do that?" These questions contain a hidden judgmental component. Louder than words, they seem to shout, "You haven't been clear; you haven't explained adequately; you are hiding the true reasons for what you told me." Ethnographic interviewing differs from most other approaches by the absence of probing "why" and "what do you mean" questions.

Let me contrast the use of *why* questions and *meaning* questions with the strategy of asking informants how they use their ordinary language. An unfamiliar term emerged in my interviews with tramps; it was called "days hanging." I heard an informant say, "I had twenty days hanging so I pled guilty and asked the judge for the alcoholism treatment center." Another recalled, "Well, I left town because I had a lot of days hanging." Tramps could respond to direct questions and at first I asked things like, "Why did you have twenty days hanging?" "Why did you leave town?" and "What do you mean you had twenty days hanging?" However, this kind of questioning led directly to translations for my benefit. "Well, I had twenty days hanging because I'd made the bucket four times in a row." "I left town 'cause I knew I'd do hard time." And such translations required still more probing "why" questions—"Why did you have twenty days?" "What do you mean, did hard time?" Such questions communicated to my informants that they had not been clear. In a subtle, unspoken way, these questions pressured informants to use their translation competence.

As time went on I learned that instead of asking for meaning, it worked best to ask for use. Cultural meaning emerges from understanding how people *use* their ordinary language. With tramps, I would restate, then ask how the phrase was used. For example, I would say, "You had twenty days hanging. Could you tell me what you would say to the judge if you had ten or thirty or sixty days hanging?" Or I might ask for the way others used this phrase: "Would tramps generally talk about the days they had hanging before they went into the courtroom? What kinds of things would I hear them saying?" I might be more direct: "What are some other ways you could talk about days hanging?" or "Would someone ever say, 'I had twenty days hanging so I pled *not* guilty'?" Asking for use is a guiding principle that underlies all ethnographic interviewing. When combined with restating and making repeated explanations, ethnographic interviews usually move quickly through the stage of exploration.

Cooperation

In time, the rapport process moves into the next stage—cooperation. Informants often cooperate from the start of the first interview, but this stage involves more complete cooperation based on mutual trust. Instead of uncertainty, the ethnographer and informant know what to expect of one another. They no longer worry about offending each other or making mis-

takes in asking or answering questions. More and more, both persons find satisfaction in meeting together to talk. Informants may offer personal information and feel free to ask the ethnographer questions. Most important, both share in the definition of the interviews; they both know the goal is to discover the culture of the informant in the language of the informant. Now informants may spontaneously correct the ethnographer: "No, I wouldn't say 'the police arrested me,' but that 'a bull pinched me.'"

Participation

The final stage in the rapport process is *participation*. After many weeks of working closely with an informant, sometimes a new dimension is added to the relationship, one in which the informant recognizes and accepts the role of teaching the ethnographer. When this happens there is a heightened sense of cooperation and full participation in the research. Informants begin to take a more assertive role. They bring new information to the attention of the ethnographer and help in discovering patterns in their culture. They may begin to *analyze* their culture, but always from their own frame of reference. Between interviews they are on the lookout for information relevant to the ethnographic goals. Not all informants progress to this last stage of participation. If they do, they increasingly become participant observers in their own cultural scene. The ethnographer's role is then to help informant/participant-observers record what they know.

Building rapport is a complex process, one that every ethnographer must monitor when doing field work. In conducting ethnographic interviews, this process is facilitated by following certain principles: keep informants talking; make repeated explanations; restate what informants say; and don't ask for meaning, ask for use. When combined with asking ethnographic questions, rapport will usually develop in a smooth way from apprehension through cooperation and even into the stage of participation.

ETHNOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

In most forms of interviewing, questions are distinct from answers. The interviewer asks the questions, someone else responds with answers. This separation often means that questions and answers come from two different cultural meaning systems. Investigators from one cultural scene draw on their frame of reference to formulate questions. The people who respond are from a different cultural scene and draw on another frame of reference to provide answers. This kind of interviewing assumes that questions and answers are separate elements in human thinking. In the study of other cultures it frequently leads to distortions.

Ethnographic interviewing, on the other hand, begins with the assumption

that the question-answer sequence is a single element in human thinking. Questions always imply answers. Statements of any kind always imply questions. This is true even when the questions and answers remain unstated. In ethnographic interviewing, *both questions and answers must be discovered from informants*. Mary Black and Duane Metzger have summarized this point of view:

It is basic to communications theory that you don't start getting any information from an utterance or event until you know what it is in response to—you must know what question is being answered. It could be said of ethnography that until you know the question that someone in the culture is responding to you can't know many things about the responses. Yet the ethnographer is greeted, in the field, with an array of *responses*. He needs to know what question people are *answering* in their every act. He needs to know which questions are being taken for granted because they are what "everybody knows" without thinking. . . . Thus the task of the ethnographer is to discover questions that seek the relationship among entities that are conceptually meaningful to the people under investigation (1965:144).

There are three main ways to discover questions when studying another culture. First, the ethnographer can record the questions people ask in the course of everyday life. An ethnographer on a university campus in the United States might hear students asking the following questions about motion pictures: "Who stars in that one?" or "Is it rated R?" Other questions would probably be asked about particular courses such as: "Is that a sluff course?" or "When does it meet?" Some settings offer unique opportunities for discovering questions, as Frake has pointed out:

The ethnographer can listen for queries in use in the cultural scenes he observes, giving special attention to query-rich settings, e.g., children querying parents, medical specialists querying patients, legal authorities querying witnesses, priests querying the gods (1964a:143).

Second, the ethnographer can inquire directly about questions used by participants in a cultural scene. Black and Metzger have suggested three strategies:

1. To ask the informant, "What is an interesting question about _____?"
2. To ask the informant, "What is a question to which the answer is _____?"
3. To ask the informant to write a text in question-and-answer form on some topic of interest to the investigator (1965:146)

In my ethnographic research with tramps and cocktail waitresses I found it useful to create a hypothetical situation and then ask for questions. For example, I would ask a waitress-informant, "If I listened to waitresses

talking among themselves at the beginning of an evening, what questions would I hear them ask each other?" To which they might answer, "Who's the other bartender tonight?" or "Which section would you like to work?"

A third strategy for discovering questions simply asks informants to talk about a particular cultural scene. This approach uses general *descriptive questions* that are less likely to reflect the ethnographer's culture. Answers can be used to discover other culturally relevant questions. This approach is like offering informants a frame and canvas and asking them to paint a word-picture of their experience. "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" and "Could you describe a typical evening at Brady's Bar?" are examples of such *descriptive questions*. A variation on this approach developed by Agar (1969) in his study of heroin addicts in prison, is to ask two or more informants to role-play typical interactions from the cultural scene under consideration. As informants talk to each other, the ethnographer can record questions and answers. In the rest of this chapter I want to discuss in detail several kinds of descriptive questions.

DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONS

Descriptive questions take "advantage of the power of language to construe settings" (Frake 1964a:143). The ethnographer does need to know at least one setting in which the informant carries out routine activities. For example, I needed to know my informants spent much of their time in jail to be able to ask, "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" I needed to know that cocktail waitresses worked evenings in Brady's Bar to be able to ask, "Could you describe a typical evening at Brady's Bar?" Because ethnographers almost always know *who* an informant is, they almost always know at least one appropriate setting to be used in a descriptive question. If one is studying air-traffic controllers, it is easy to ask, "What do you do as an air-traffic controller?" If one is studying the culture of housewives, it is easy to ask an informant, "Could you describe a typical day? What do you do as a housewife?"

There are five major types of descriptive questions and several subtypes (Figure 4.1). Their precise form will depend on the cultural scene selected for investigation. Descriptive questions aim to elicit a large sample of utterances in the informant's native language. They are intended to encourage an informant to talk about a particular cultural scene. Sometimes a single descriptive question can keep an informant talking for more than an hour.

One key principle in asking descriptive questions is that *expanding the length of the question tends to expand the length of the response*. Although a question like, "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" qualifies as a descriptive question, it needs expansion. Instead of this brief form, I might say, "I've never been inside the jail before, so I don't have much of an idea

FIGURE 4.1 Kinds of Descriptive Questions

1	Grand Tour Questions
1.1	Typical Grand Tour Questions
1.2	Specific Grand Tour Questions
1.3	Guided Grand Tour Questions
1.4	Task-Related Grand Tour Questions
2	Mini-Tour Questions
2.1	Typical Mini-Tour Questions
2.2	Specific Mini-Tour Questions
2.3	Guided Mini-Tour Questions
2.4	Task-Related Mini-Tour Questions
3	Example Questions
4	Experience Questions
5	Native-Language Questions
5.1	Direct Language Questions
5.2	Hypothetical-Interaction Questions
5.3	Typical-Sentence Questions

what it's like. Could you kind of take me through the jail and tell me what it's like, what I would see if I went into the jail and walked all around? Could you tell me what it's like?" Expanding descriptive questions not only gives informants time to think, but it says, "Tell me as much as you can, in great detail."

1. Grand Tour Questions

A grand tour question simulates an experience many ethnographers have when they first begin to study a cultural scene. I arrived at the alcoholism treatment center and the director asked, "Would you like a grand tour of the place?" As we walked from building to building, he named the places and objects we saw, introduced me to people, and explained the activities in progress. I could not ask tramps to give me a grand tour of the Seattle City Jail, so I simply asked a grand tour question: "Could you describe the inside of the jail for me?" In both situations, I easily collected a large sample of native terms about these cultural scenes.

A grand tour usually takes place in a particular locale: a jail, a college campus, a home, a factory, a city, a fishing boat, etc. Grand tour questions about a locale almost always make sense to informants. We can now expand the idea of "grand tour" to include many other aspects of experience. In addition to *space*, informants can give us a grand tour through some *time* period: "Could you describe the main things that happen during the school year, beginning in September and going through May or June?" They can take an ethnographer through a sequence of *events*: "Can you tell me all the things that happen when you get arrested for being drunk, from the first moment you encounter the police, through going to court and being sentenced, until you finally get out of jail?" An informant can give the ethnog-

rapher a grand tour through some group of *people*: "Can you tell me the names of all your relatives and what each one is like?" Some large events such as a ceremony are made up of *activities* that can become the basis for a grand tour question: "What are all the things that you do during the initiation ceremony for new members who join the fraternity?" Even a group of *objects* offers an opportunity for a grand tour: "Could you describe all the different tools and other equipment you use in farming?" Whether the ethnographer uses *space, time, events, people, activities, or objects*, the end result is the same: a verbal description of significant features of the cultural scene. Grand tour questions encourage informants to ramble on and on. There are four different types which vary the way such questions are asked.

1.1. Typical Grand Tour Questions. In this form, the ethnographer asks for a description of how things usually are. "Could you describe a *typical* night at Brady's Bar?" One might ask a secretary informant: "Could you describe a *typical* day at the office?" In studying Kwakiutl salmon fishing, I asked, "Could you tell me how you *usually* make a set?" Typical grand tour questions ask the informant to generalize, to talk about a pattern of events.

1.2. Specific Grand Tour Questions. A specific question takes the most recent day, the most recent series of events, or the locale best known to the informant. "Could you describe what happened at Brady's Bar last night, from the moment you arrived until you left?" An ethnographer might ask a secretary, "Tell me what you did yesterday, from the time you got to work until you left?" "Tell me about the last time you made a set, fishing for salmon." Some informants find it difficult to generalize to the *typical* but can easily describe a recent situation.

1.3. Guided Grand Tour Questions. This form asks the informant to give an actual grand tour. A secretary might be asked: "Could you show me around the office?" The ethnographer might ask a Kwakiutl fisherman, "The next time you make a set, can I come along and could you explain to me what you are doing?" Some subjects, such as a typical year or month, do not lend themselves to a guided tour.

1.4. Task-Related Grand Tour Questions. These questions ask the informant to perform some simple task that aids in the description. For example, I frequently asked tramps, "Could you draw a map of the inside of the Seattle City Jail and explain to me what it's like?" While performing this task, they added a great deal of verbal description. The map helped informants to remember and gave me a better understanding of the jail as they saw it. In studying the cultural scene of baggamon players, I asked, "Could you play a game of baggamon and explain what you are doing?" When informants perform tasks in the context of grand tour questions, the

ethnographer can ask numerous questions along the way, such as, "What is this?" and "What are you doing now?"

2. Mini-Tour Questions

Responses to grand tour questions offer almost unlimited opportunities for investigating smaller aspects of experience. Because grand tour questions lead to such rich descriptions, it is easy to overlook these new opportunities. One ethnographer, investigating the culture of directory assistance operators working for Bell Telephone Co., began with a grand tour question: "Could you describe a typical day in your work as a directory assistance operator?" After a lengthy description, she discovered that one recurrent activity was "taking calls." Each call lasted an average of 37 seconds. This led to a mini-tour question: "Could you describe what goes on in taking a call?" The informant was able to break down that brief period of time into more than a dozen activities, ones that were far more complex than the ethnographer realized when she asked the question.¹

Mini-tour questions are identical to grand tour questions except they deal with a much smaller unit of experience. "Could you describe what you do when you take a break at Brady's Bar?" "Could you draw me a map of the trusty tank in the Seattle City Jail?" "Could you describe to me how you take phone calls in your work as a secretary?" The four kinds of mini-tour questions (typical, specific, guided, task-related) use the same approaches as their counterparts do with grand tour questions.

3. Example Questions

Example questions are still more specific, in most cases. They take some single act or event identified by the informant and ask for an example. A tramp, in responding to a grand tour question, says, "I was arrested while pooling," and so I would ask, "Can you give me an example of pooling?" A waitress states, "There was a table of guys who really gave me a hard time last night." An example question: "Could you give me an example of someone giving you a hard time?" This type of question can be woven throughout almost any ethnographic interview. It often leads to the most interesting stories of actual happenings which an ethnographer will discover.

4. Experience Questions

This type merely asks informants for any experiences they have had in some particular setting. "You've probably had some interesting experiences in jail; can you recall any of them?" "Could you tell me about some experiences you have had working as a directory assistance operator?" These questions are so open ended that informants sometimes have

difficulty answering them. They also tend to elicit atypical events rather than recurrent, routine ones. They are best used after asking numerous grand tour and mini-tour questions.

5. Native-Language Questions

Native-language questions are designed to minimize the influence of informants' translation competence. Because descriptive questions are a first step to discovering more culturally relevant questions, they sometimes contain words and phrases seldom used by informants. This encourages informants to translate. Native-language questions ask informants to use the terms and phrases most commonly used in the cultural scene.

When I first began studying tramps, I only knew they were often incarcerated in the Seattle City Jail. "Could you describe the jail?" was a useful grand tour question, but I still was not sure that "jail" was a commonly used term. And so I asked a native-language question: "How would you refer to the jail?" When informants uniformly said, "Oh, most guys would call it *the bucket*," I was able to use this term in future questions. "How would you talk about getting arrested?" led to the term "made the bucket." Only then could I ask more meaningful descriptive questions like "Could you describe in detail what happens from beginning to end when you make the bucket?"

Native-language questions serve to remind informants that the ethnographer wants to learn their language. They can be used whenever one suspects an informant is translating for the ethnographer's benefit. They should be employed frequently in early interviews until an informant begins to state voluntarily, "The way we would say it is _____," or "Our term for that is _____." Every ethnographer can develop ways to insert native-language queries into each interview. I want to identify three useful strategies.

5.1. Direct-Language Questions. This type of native-language question simply asks "How would you refer to it?" when an informant uses a term. Sometimes it may take the form "Is that the way most people would say it?" For example, tramps often spoke of trying to find a place to sleep at night, so I would ask: "Would you say, 'I was trying to find a place to sleep?'" "No," they responded. "Probably I would say I was trying to *make a flop*." An ethnographer studying the culture of secretaries might ask the following native-language question:

SECRETARY: When I type letters I have to watch out for mistakes.

ETHNOGRAPHER: How would you refer to *mistakes*?

SECRETARY: Oh, I would call them *typos*.

The more familiar the informant and ethnographer are with each other's

cultures, the more important native-language questions become. I asked many direct-language questions of cocktail waitresses for this reason. An informant would say, "These two customers were really hassling me," and I would ask, "How would you refer to them, as *customers*?" To which she would reply: "I'd probably say those two *obnoxious*."

5.2. Hypothetical-Interaction Questions. Speaking takes place between people with particular identities. When an informant is talking to an ethnographer, it may be difficult to recall ways to talk to other people. The ethnographer can help in this recall by creating a hypothetical interaction. For example, an ethnographer could ask, "If you were talking to another directory assistance operator, would you say it that way?" Tramps not only interact among themselves but with policemen, or *bulls*. I often phrased hypothetical-interaction questions to discover how tramps talked to bulls as well as to other tramps.

Hypothetical-interaction questions can be used to generate many native-language utterances. I have interviewed children about school who could easily recall native usages when placed in situations such as the following: "If I were to sit in the back of your classroom, what kinds of things would I hear kids saying to each other?" "If a friend called on the phone to ask if you were going to bring your lunch, what would that person say?" It is even possible to construct the situation in more detail, as in the following question to a waitress: "Imagine yourself at a table of four male customers. You haven't said anything yet, and you don't know any of them. What kinds of things would they likely say to you when you first walked up to their table?" By being placed in a typical situation and having the identities of speaker and listener specified, most informants overcome any tendency to translate and recall many phrases used in ordinary talk.

5.3. Typical-Sentence Questions. A closely related kind of native-language question, this one asks for typical sentences that contain a word or phrase. "What are some sentences I would hear that include the phrase *making the buck*?" or "What are some sentences that use the term *flap*?" are two examples. The typical-sentence question provides an informant with one or more native terms and then asks that informant to use them in typical ways.

Descriptive questions form the basis of all ethnographic interviewing. They lead directly to a large sample of utterances that are expressed in the language used by informants in the cultural scene under investigation.

All ethnographic questions can be phrased in both personal and cultural terms. When phrasing questions *personally*, the ethnographer asks, "Can you describe a typical evening you would have at Brady's Bar?" or "How would you refer to the jail?" This tells the informant to present his own point

of view or her own particular language usage. When phrasing questions *culturally*, the ethnographer asks, "Can you describe a typical evening for most cocktail waitresses at Brady's Bar?" or "How would most tramps refer to the jail?" An informant is someone who can tell about patterns of behavior in a particular scene, not merely his or her own actions. I recall one novice ethnographer who asked a letter carrier about lunch. "I don't eat lunch" was the reply. The ethnographer later rephrased the question in cultural terms: "What do letter carriers do at lunch time?" This query brought a long response which included those who didn't eat lunch, those who brought lunches and ate together, those who ate at restaurants, and several other variations. The various things letter carriers did at lunch turned out to be important cultural information. But eliciting this information depended on phrasing the question in cultural terms.

In this chapter we have examined the rapport process and some of the principles that will facilitate the development of rapport. In addition, we have examined the nature of ethnographic questions and descriptive questions in particular. Descriptive questions form the backbone of all ethnographic interviews. They will make up most of the questions asked in the first interview and their use will continue throughout all subsequent interviews. With practice, a beginning ethnographer can easily gain skill in asking this type of ethnographic question.

Tasks

- 4.1. Review the examples given of the various kinds of descriptive questions and prepare several of each type for informants in the cultural scene you are studying.
- 4.2. Conduct and record an ethnographic interview with an informant, using descriptive questions.
- 4.3. Transcribe the recorded interview (or expand the condensed notes taken during the interview).

ASKING STRUCTURAL QUESTIONS

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the various kinds of structural questions.
2. To learn how to use structural questions in ethnographic interviews.
3. To test hypothesized domains and discover additional included terms for those domains by asking structural questions.

Let us review briefly where the Developmental Research Sequence has brought us. We began with three preparatory steps: (1) Locating an informant; (2) Interviewing an informant; and (3) Making an ethnographic record. With Step Four the actual ethnographic interviews began by (4) Asking descriptive questions. Using the sample of language collected from this interview, we went on to the next step, which introduced strategies for (5) Analyzing ethnographic interviews. This was followed by (6) Making a domain analysis, following the steps outlined in the last chapter. This analysis resulted in structural questions which will be employed in future interviews. By following the steps thus far, you have selected an informant, conducted three ethnographic interviews, and undertaken an in-depth analysis to discover the folk categories into which the culture is divided. We are now ready to test these hypothesized folk categories (domains) and discover additional included terms. In the last interview with an informant you introduced several structural questions. In this chapter I want to examine several important interviewing principles the ethnographer should follow in asking this type of question. Then I will present all the different types of structural questions.

PRINCIPLES FOR ASKING STRUCTURAL QUESTIONS

Structural questions need to be adapted to each individual informant, meshed with other kinds of questions, and skillfully repeated over and over again. Each of the following principles will serve as guides for using structural questions.

Concurrent Principle

Ask structural questions *concurrently* with descriptive questions. They complement rather than replace descriptive

questions. Although the Developmental Research Sequence goes from descriptive questions to structural questions to contrast questions, the ethnographer never proceeds from descriptive to structural to contrast *interviews*. Descriptive questions will make up part of every interview. From this point on, structural questions will also find their way into every interview. And beginning with Step Nine, contrast questions will become part of each interview. Indeed, with new informants from the same cultural scene, an experienced ethnographer will make use of all types of ethnographic questions almost from the start.

The concurrent principle means that it is best to *alternate* the various types of questions in each interview. For example, the following sequence shows how this might occur:¹

ETHNOGRAPHER: You mentioned that the deaf use different ways to communicate.

What are some of these? (Structural question)

INFORMANT: Yes, they can use writing, lipreading, sign language like ASL or signed English, and pantomiming. (Included terms)

ETHNOGRAPHER: Can you give me an example of signed English? (Descriptive question)

INFORMANT: Oh, yes. Like you might sign, I will go to the store, using signs for all the words in English and also indicating the future tense, will go.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Can you tell me more about signed English: when people use it, how deaf people feel about it, and maybe your experience using it? (Descriptive question)

INFORMANT: Well, most really deaf people learn ASL and some have trouble with signed English. Most times you can tell when it's a hearing person using sign because they use Signed English. That's what they always used when I went to school with hearing kids, but at home we used ASL.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Let's go back to the other ways to communicate. You said that ASL, signed English, writing, lipreading, and pantomiming were all ways to communicate. Can you think of any other ways the deaf use to communicate? (Structural question)

INFORMANT: Oh, yes. There's speaking. Some deaf use that, and then there's Quech Speech, that's something developed by a professor at Gallaudet College. (Included terms)

Alternating questions is different from simply including each type of question in an interview; they are thoroughly mixed together in an almost random fashion. This will not only keep an informant from becoming bored, but it relieves any anxiety created by the test-like-effect of structural and contrast questions. Take a question like "Can you tell me all the different kinds of cars?" Most of us would immediately feel overwhelmed if asked this question. However, by asking, "What are *some* of the different kinds of cars?" and by interspersing answers with descriptive questions about the cars one has owned, the cars owned by friends, and the cars one would like

to own, the task becomes easier. The concurrent principle is a guide to making interviews as much like friendly conversations as possible.

Explanation Principle

Structural questions often require an explanation. Although ordinary conversation is sprinkled with structural questions in one form or another (What kind of car did you buy? What kinds of cars have you thought about buying?), they are not as common as descriptive questions. In a sense, the ethnographer moves further away from the friendly conversation when introducing structural questions. Unless informants understand this, a structural question may take them off guard and limit their response. Consider two examples drawn from a study of ballet culture; each example uses the same structural question, but one does not include an explanation.²

1. What are all the different kinds of exercises you do in ballet class?
2. We've been talking about your ballet classes and you've mentioned some of the different exercises you do in class. Now, I want to ask you a slightly different kind of question. I'm interested in getting a list of all the different kinds of exercises done in class or at least all the ones you have done since you started taking ballet. This might take a little time, but I'd like to know all the different types, what you would call them.

The second example will assist informants to respond far more than the first one. Sometimes an ethnographer can go further and explain the purpose of gathering a long list of included terms. Consider the following example from a study of Collier's Encyclopedia salespeople:³

ETHNOGRAPHER: I've learned from other salespeople that certain phrases or sayings are used pretty often, like "Hooray for Colliers!" Would you use that phrase? INFORMANT: Oh, yes, all the time.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, if I'm going to understand the meaning of phrases like this, what they mean to you and other salespeople, I need to go into this whole area in depth. First, I'd like to know all the different phrases that are used frequently when you're with other salespeople. After we get a list of all the different ones we can go back over them and find out how each kind is different from the others. O.K., let's begin. Can you tell me some different phrases I would hear from Colliers salespeople when they are together?

INFORMANT: Well, there is "Hooray for Colliers," "Rock 'em and sock 'em," "Fantastic," "I'm enthused," and "Are we oysters or are we eagles?"

Native-language explanations are especially important when asking structural questions (see Step Two). The ethnographer merely prefaces the structural questions with a reminder like "I'm interested in the way you and other ballet dancers refer to exercises, what you would call them in class."

Or, in asking about exercises, one might include the word *name*. "What are the names you would use for all the different kinds of exercises?" Informants need continual reminders that the ethnographer wants to understand their ordinary language.

Explaining the nature of structural questions will often take the form of examples. For instance, the ethnographer can take some familiar domain, possibly one shared with the informant, and use that as an example to make clear the nature of a structural question. In a study of a large midwestern costume shop, a structural question could be introduced in the following way:⁴

I'm interested in all the different kinds of masquerade wear (folk term for costumes) that you rent to customers. Now, if I asked you, are there different kinds of trees, you could probably think of some, like pine tree, an oak, and a birch. Either of us could list a lot of trees. But you have learned to recognize many different kinds of masquerade wear, and I've never heard of most of them. In fact, I'd probably call them all *costumes*. Can you list as many different kinds of masquerade wear as you can think of?

Another type of example, one used almost all the time, repeats the included terms already discovered. I make it a rule never to ask a structural question without repeating at least some of the included terms (if I know them) for the informant. This serves to make clear what I want to know and it jogs the memory of the informant. Here are two typical structural questions which include this repetition of included terms:

1. I'm interested in knowing all the different ways the deaf use to communicate. You mentioned ASL, signed English, pantomiming, speaking, *Que'd Speech*, and *writing*. Can you think of any other ways the deaf use to communicate?
2. We've talked about your classroom and all the things you do their during school. Now, I'd like to ask you a different kind of question about all the parts of the room, so I can get them clear. You said there was the *doorway*, where you come in; and there's the *blackboard*, that's a part of the room. And the *reading center*, and the *bulletin board*. Can you think of any other parts of the classroom?

By listing several known included terms in this manner, most informants immediately recall additional terms. One such example speaks more clearly than several explanations.

Repetition Principle

Structural questions must be repeated many times to elicit all the included terms of a folk domain. Take the example of kinds of flops. This large

domain was explored by the question "What are all the different kinds of flops?" Never once did an informant volunteer all the more than one hundred different types in answer to this single question. For one thing, most informants did not believe I could possibly want to know all the types. More important, they couldn't recall them all. By repeating the question many times during an interview ("Can you think of any other flops?") and during many different interviews, I was able to assist informants to remember the entire list.

In his study of plants (folk botany) among the Haunoo in the Philippines, Harold Conklin found that informants knew nearly 1400 types of plants. To elicit all the names in this folk domain required great ingenuity to think of ways to vary the question and to repeat it under many different circumstances (Conklin 1954).

One reason for asking structural questions concurrently with descriptive questions is to reduce the boredom and tediousness that come with constant repetition. The goal in all this repetition is to exhaustively elicit the folk terms in a domain, to discover all the included terms known to informants. Only then can the ethnographer proceed to find the differences and similarities among the domain members.

Context principle

When asking structural questions, provide the informant with contextual information. This places the informant in the setting where the domain is relevant. For example, a brief structural question like "Can you think of any other kinds of flops?" was effective for someone whom I had previously asked numerous structural questions about flops. However, it was not effective for a new informant. When a structural question of this sort is first introduced, the following kind of contextual information is required.

ETHNOGRAPHER: I've learned from other tramps that one thing tramps do when they travel is make a flop. Is that right? Is making a flop something common among tramps?

INFORMANT: Yes, they're always lookin' for a flop, especially when you're on the road.

ETHNOGRAPHER: I suppose that as you travel from one town to another you have come across a lot of different kinds of flops?

INFORMANT: Sure have. One time in Chattanooga, I made a flop in a mortar box, in an old filling station. And some guys make a flop in a hotel lobby or the toilet of an old hotel.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, I'm interested in finding out about all the different kinds of flops that tramps make use of. Not only the ones you have used, but those used by tramps you have talked to. Do tramps ever talk about the flops they make?

INFORMANT: Yes, they talk about that a lot, 'cause making a flop is one of the most important things to a tramp. You often see a guy on the skid and you know he's

either trying to make a jug or trying to make a flop. He might be panhandling or something but he's trying to make a flop.

ETHNOGRAPHER: O.K., now let's go back to my earlier question and I'd like to write down as many kinds of flops as you can tell me about. What are all the different kinds of flops that you know about? I realize there may be a lot and if you can't think of them all now, that is O.K. We can come back to it later, but why don't you start with the ones you can think of?

Consider another example which recreates the contexts in which an informant would normally use the information desired.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Colliers salespeople often work together and you attend a lot of meetings with other salespeople, right?

INFORMANT: Oh, yes. We're together almost every day, either on the road or in training classes or meetings.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, from what others have said and from what you have told me, when salespeople are together, they often use short phrases, things that might get people ready to sell or keep them going even when times are tough. Like "Howray Colliers!"

INFORMANT: (Laughs) Sure, you hear things like that all the time.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, if I went out selling with a group and we were all together in the car, say just arriving at a place where we would sell, what kinds of sayings or phrases that people repeat a lot would I hear? If you can't think of them all, that's fine, we can come back to it later, but why don't you tell me the ones you can think of.

Adding contextual information expands a structural question. It aids greatly in recall and will avoid the problem of making an informant feel he is being tested with a series of short questions. The series of structural questions generated from a domain analysis are not the same as a questionnaire that lists a series of questions. They are not even the same as a set of questions one might prepare for an interview guide, questions to be asked one after the other. Rather, structural questions must be seen as tools, each to be adapted to particular informants, each used over and over to exhaustively explore a folk domain. Providing contextual information is merely one way to better adapt an extremely useful tool to the interview situation.

Cultural Framework Principle

The ethnographer must phrase structural questions in cultural as well as personal terms.⁵ In a previous example the question was asked in both ways:

Personal: What are all the different kinds of flops that you know about?

Cultural: I'm interested in finding out about all the different kinds of flops that tramps make use of.

It is often easier for an informant to begin responding to questions about his or her own personal experience. "What are the kinds of masquerade wear that you have rented to customers?" "What are all the kinds of drinks you have served at Brady's Bar?" But before exhausting the information known to an informant, it is important to rephrase questions in cultural terms. "What are all the drinks served at Brady's?" "What are all the kinds of masquerade wear a person could possibly rent at the store?" Sometimes an informant needs to be reminded that they know about the experiences of others: "You have heard from other waitresses about the hassles they have, I'm sure. I'd like to know, not only the ones you know about from personal experience, but all the ways that waitresses might get hassled, all the ways you can recall from what others have told you or what you have seen."

As we now discuss the different kinds of structural questions, keep in mind that their exact form will change as you follow the concurrent principle, the explanation principle, the repetition principle, the context principle, and the cultural framework principle.

KINDS OF STRUCTURAL QUESTIONS

There are five major types of structural questions and several subtypes (Figure 7.1). Although some serve different functions, most represent alternative ways to verify the existence of a folk domain or to elicit folk terms included in a folk domain. With some informants I have used all five types of questions; with others, a particular structural question works better than others. The ethnographer must be sensitive to individual responses to each type of question, using those best suited to each informant.

1. Verification Questions

Verification questions ask an informant to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses about a folk domain. They provide the informant with information and a request for a yes or no answer. Let's say I have hypothesized that a *hotel*

lobby and an *alley* are both kinds of flops. I can confirm or disconfirm this hypothesis by asking, "Is a hotel lobby a kind of flop? Is an alley a kind of flop?" In addition to asking verification questions about terms discovered during domain analysis, the ethnographer also seeks to verify those elicited directly from informants. If an informant gives a long list of items in response to a question during one interview, it is important to begin the next interview with a verification question. For example, one might say, "During our last talk you told me many of the different kinds of masquerade wear. I'd like to go over the ones you told me, just to quickly see if I have them all correct. You would say that *animals* are one kind of masquerade wear? *Clown things*? *Eastern costumes*? *Thirties-type stock*? *Tiger suit*? *Gorilla suit*? *Superman*?" After each question informants should respond yes or no to indicate whether the terms belong to the domain.

1.1 Domain Verification Questions. This type of question seeks to verify the existence of a domain for which the ethnographer has hypothesized a cover term. It takes the following form: "Are there different kinds of Y's?" (Y is a cover term.)

In her study of midwest junior high school teachers, Gregory (1976) hypothesized the cover term *kinds of groups*. Her informant confirmed this hypothesis by an affirmative answer to the verification question: "Are there different kinds of groups here at Midwest Junior High?" It is also possible to confirm domains by examining interview data or other field notes. If informants make direct reference to the existence of different kinds of groups, one can move on to other kinds of structural questions. For example, from participant observation Starr knew that people recognized different ethnic groups in Lebanon (1978). He merely started asking, "What kinds of groups are there in Lebanon?" People responded to this query with folk terms like *Moslems*, *Alawi*, *Kurds*, *Japanese*, and *foreigners*. This confirmed the folk domain and also led to included terms.

1.2. Included Term Verification Questions. This type of question seeks to verify whether one or more terms are included in a domain. It takes the form "Is X a kind of flop?" or "Is X a way to hassle waitresses?" One could verify the ethnic groups from the last example by asking, "Are Moslems a kind of group in Lebanon?" This type of structural question assumes that both a cover term and one or more included terms are known to the ethnographer.

1.3. Semantic Relationship Verification Questions. The ethnographer may have hypothesized a domain on the basis of some universal semantic relationship which informants find awkward. For this reason it is often necessary to test the appropriateness of the way a semantic relation is expressed. For example, although *kinds of groups* might be the best way to express the

FIGURE 7.1 Kinds of Structural Questions

1. Verification Questions
 - 1.1. Domain Verification Questions
 - 1.2. Included Term Verification Questions
 - 1.3. Semantic Relationship Verification Questions
 - 1.4. Native-Language Verification Questions
2. Cover Term Questions
3. Included Term Questions
4. Substitution Frame Questions
5. Card Sorting Structural Questions

relationship for people at Midwest Junior High, this can be tested. You could ask, "How would most teachers say it, that administrators are a kind of group? Or that administrators are one group?" You can ask directly in many cases: "Would tramps ever say, 'a hotel lobby is a kind of flop?' " Some semantic relationships require testing more than others. For example, in studying a school classroom one might hypothesize that there are different parts of a classroom. "Would you say, 'different parts of a class?' " This might lead to the response, "No, there are different places in a class." I might search for several possible semantic relations which would express a domain, then ask, "Would it be better to say that a bulletin board is part of the classroom or a place in the classroom?" Sometimes an informant will say, "Either one is OK," suggesting two closely related domains or two ways to express the same relationship. By emphasizing the semantic relationship, the ethnographer can quickly gain the help of an informant to identify the most appropriate phrase.

1.4. Native-Language Verification Questions. No matter how long one has interviewed an informant, the tendency to translate never disappears. For this reason it is necessary to continually verify whether a particular term is a *folk term* rather than a *translation* created for the benefit of the ethnographer. Native-language verification questions take the form "Is this a term you would use?" or "Would most tramps usually say _____ when talking with other tramps?" Consider the following example of how a native-language verification question might be used to discover if the phrase *places to sleep* is a translation of a native folk term:

ETHNOGRAPHER: Tramps have a lot of different places they can make a flop, is that right?
 INFORMANT: Yes. You can sleep in a box car or at the Sally or in a flophouse.
 ETHNOGRAPHER: Are there any other places?
 INFORMANT: Yes, you can sleep in a hotel lobby, a window well, there must be dozens of other places to sleep.
 ETHNOGRAPHER: What would you call all these places?
 INFORMANT: Well, they're just all places to sleep?
 ETHNOGRAPHER: Would tramps ever call them *flops*?
 INFORMANT: Oh yes! That's the term we would always use. I'm trying to make a flop, or I had a good flop last night.

It may seem an unimportant distinction made between *places to sleep* and a *flop*. However, our assumption is that people code and store information about their experience by using highly salient folk terms. Certainly one attribute of *flop* is that it is a place to sleep, but that is not synonymous with *flop*. If you ask, "What are all the places a tramp can sleep?" you will not elicit all the terms in a folk domain about flops. Even if the two terms were synonymous, it is our assumption that recall will be much more exhaustive

by using folk terms most familiar to the informant. Native-language verification questions about domains will be interspersed throughout every interview, for they allow the ethnographer to check on the tendency of most informants to translate.

2. Cover Term Questions

This type of structural question is the one most frequently used. It can be asked whenever you have a cover term. Here is a list of examples:

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| Kinds of bulls | Are there different kinds of bulls? |
| Kinds of groups | Are there different kinds of groups at Midwest Junior High? |
| Ways to get tips | Are there different ways to get tips? |
| Steps in making a sale | What are all the different steps in making a sale of encyclopedias? |

When your informant answers such questions affirmatively, it is easy to continue asking, "Could you tell me what some of them are?" or "Can you think of any others?" If your informant answers in the negative, it may indicate that you do not have a cover term or that it is an area outside your informants' knowledge.

3. Included Term Questions

Every folk domain has two or more included terms. Sometimes these surface before you have discovered the cover term for the domain (if it exists). For example, a clerk at the costume shop might say, "I rented so many things today—Peter Pan, Robin Hood, Raggedy Andy, Little Lord Fauntleroy, and a bunch of others." You could then ask the following questions:

ETHNOGRAPHER: Are Peter Pan, Robin Hood, Raggedy Andy, and Little Lord Fauntleroy all the same kind of thing?
 INFORMANT: Yes, they're all kinds of miscellaneous character costumes.
 ETHNOGRAPHER: Are there any other kinds of miscellaneous character costumes?

Included term questions are often awkward to ask. If you only have one term, they may confuse your informant: "Is rainy weather a reason for something? Is panhandling a way to something?" For this reason, it is probably best to reserve these questions for times when you have collected several terms, which by their use you are sure belong in the same domain.

4. Substitution Frame Questions

Substitution frames are a way to ask structural questions. They are constructed from a normal statement used by an informant. One term is removed from the sentence and an informant is asked to *substitute* other meaningful terms. Here is a sample substitution frame:

1. Original statement: You find bulls in the bucket.
2. Substitution frame: You find _____ in the bucket.
3. Substitution frame question: Can you think of any other terms that might go in that sentence?
4. Responses: (a) You find *drunks* in the bucket.
(b) You find *turnkeys* in the bucket.
(c) You find *trusties* in the bucket.

Obviously, these three kinds of people could have been discovered by asking a cover term question: What are all the different kinds of people in the bucket. However, under some conditions, substitution frames are more effective. Because they do not alter the original utterance, they may be easier for informants to use. At one point in my research with tramps I became interested in knowing about relationships between bulls and tramps. I began with a single informant sentence: "Sometimes a bull will hit a tramp for no reason at all." This led to two substitution frames. (1) Sometimes a bull will _____ a tramp for no reason at all, and (2) Sometimes a bull will hit a tramp _____. The first frame elicited things like, *take shoes to, bust, pinch, break a bottle over*, etc. The second frame elicited things like *because he's down on you, because he thinks you're going to fight, because he's had a hard day*.

When using substitution frames the same sentence has numerous possibilities, but it is best to make the sentences short and simple, with a single term removed for substitution. One of the best strategies for asking substitution frame questions is to write the original sentence out on a piece of paper. Then, write it again just below the first one, but insert a blank for the words you have removed. This visual representation makes it easy for an informant to fill in the blank with appropriate terms.

5. Card Sorting Structural Questions⁶

Structural questions almost always elicit a list of folk terms. A particular list may begin quite small but often it grows, making it difficult for informants. Writing terms on cards helps to elicit, verify, and discuss a domain. For example, I wrote all the different kinds of tramps on cards. Then I placed these cards in front of an informant and asked, "Are these all kinds of tramps?" This verification question was made easier by the use of cards.

Card sorting can occur in several ways. After I had collected a list of many different things that bulls could do to tramps, I wrote the terms on cards. Then I gave the pack of cards to an informant (nearly fifty cards) and asked, "Which of these would a *turnkey* (one kind of bull) do?" "Which of these would a *ragpicker* (another kind of bull) do?" If you have collected a number of terms that appear to go in the same domain, writing them on cards and asking informants to sort out the ones which are all the same kind of thing quickly leads to finding the boundary of a folk domain.

I have found it useful to write cover terms on a card of one color, included terms on cards of another color. As new included terms are discovered during an interview, they can be written on a separate card and placed beneath the cover term. This gives informants a visual sense of the relationships among the folk terms you are investigating and enables them to cooperate more fully.

Structural questions all function to explore the organization of an informant's cultural knowledge. They lead the ethnographer to discover and verify the presence of folk domains, cover terms for these domains, and the included terms. By using structural questions, the ethnographer does not need to impose analytic categories to organize the data from interviews or participant observation. Ethnography is more than finding out what people know; it also involves discovering how people have organized that knowledge.

Tasks

- 7.1 Prepare, in writing, structural questions of each type for several domains. Prepare explanations for these questions.
- 7.2 Conduct an ethnographic interview using structural questions to verify terms already collected and to collect terms for new domains. (Alternate with descriptive questions.)
- 7.3 Prepare a list of all verified domains with cover terms and included terms.

OBJECTIVES

- 1 To understand the major discovery principles in the study of cultural meaning
- 2 To learn the ways to discover contrasts among cultural symbols
- 3 To formulate and use contrast questions

In the last few chapters we have moved from analyzing the broad surface of many domains in a cultural scene to an in-depth analysis of one or more domains. By now you should have completed a folk taxonomy and you no doubt have several other folk taxonomies in various stages of analysis. It is important to view folk taxonomies from the perspective of the relational theory of meaning presented in Step Five: they represent the *meaning* of symbols by showing their relationships to other symbols in a domain. However, the degree of meaning revealed in a folk taxonomy is minimal because it only reveals a *single* relationship among a set of folk terms. Imagine that a person only knew that the term *foreign sports car* was a member of the taxonomy, *kinds of cars*. It would only convey one bit of information. The folk taxonomy would not provide a single clue to the status an owner might derive from such a car; nor would it tell such important information as horsepower, interior design, manufacturer's defects, or E.P.A. mileage rating. And a taxonomy of cars would not say anything about how a sports car was related to activities like racing, courting, working, or shopping. Because our goal is to understand cultural meaning, we must go well beyond constructing taxonomies of cultural domains. In this chapter we will review several strategies for discovering meaning and then show how constant questions can lead to finding many additional relationships among folk terms.

DISCOVERY PRINCIPLES IN THE STUDY OF MEANING

One of the most basic capacities of human beings is the ability to discover meaning. Children in every society discover the meaning of verbal and nonverbal symbols with great ease. Although they sometimes receive explicit instruction, children learn most of their culture's meanings without it. People can move from one society or social

setting to another where people are using different symbols. Without realizing it they become participant observers and interviewers; before much time passes, they have acquired the meanings of the new cultural scene. The tacit meanings take longer to learn, and we all recognize that the "old timers" in any scene have a rich stock of knowledge that others do not have.

Ethnography is an explicit methodology designed for finding out both the explicit and tacit knowledge familiar to the most experienced members of a culture. The methodology of ethnography can reduce the learning time by many years. Furthermore, because much of our cultural knowledge is tacit, outside awareness, the ethnographer ends up having far more *explicit* knowledge than informants. The ethnographer will not have the skill required to use that knowledge to generate behavior as the natives do, but the ethnographer will be able to talk about and communicate the knowledge in a way the natives cannot. Underlying the various methods of ethnography we have been discussing in this book are a number of discovery principles. I want to review some already discussed or implied, and introduce the principles of contrast, for it will lead to the next type of ethnographic question and the next type of ethnographic analysis.

The Relational Principle

This discovery principle was introduced in Step Five. It states: *the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it is related to all other symbols*. Ultimately, all ethnography is designed to identify cultural symbols and discover their relations within a complex system of symbols. In an earlier chapter we saw that all folk definitions arise from the way folk terms are linked by semantic relationships. Two empirical findings lend support to this discovery principle: that all cultures create meaning from relatively few semantic relationships, and that certain semantic relationships are universal.

The Use Principle

This principle states that *the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by asking how it is used rather than asking what it means*. If we ask for meaning, we will only discover the explicit meanings, the ones that people can talk about. If we ask for use, we will tap that great reservoir of tacit meanings which exists in every culture. This principle is also based on the relational theory of meaning discussed earlier. One reason ethnographers almost always combine participant observation with interviewing is to observe how folk terms are used in ordinary settings. Indeed, at this point in your research you may find that visiting the setting in which your informant carries out daily activities will reveal usages that have not been discussed in interviews.

The Similarity Principle

This principle states that *the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it is similar to other symbols*. Let's go back to the world of tramps for an example. My informants used two folk terms that held almost no similarity to me: *graveyard* and *bathub*. "You can make a flop in a graveyard and you can flop in a bathtub." Later, asking structural questions I discovered that both graveyard and bathtub were considered *flops*, along with many other folk terms. What I had discovered was that tramps saw a very important similarity between these two symbols. And, by discovering this similarity, I had taken a step into the meanings of their culture.

Although not stated previously, this discovery principle underlies both domain analysis and taxonomic analysis. When we look for members of a domain (the included terms), we are really looking for symbols that share some feature of meaning, symbols that are similar in some way. When we go further to study the internal structure of a domain, to construct a taxonomy of the way a domain is organized, we are still seeking similarities among symbols. For example, the *deck hatch*, *shark slide*, *mast*, and *bridge* are all similar—they are parts of a *tunaboot* (Figure 8.2). But from the taxonomy of this domain we can see that *deck hatch* and *shark slide* have a closer similarity not shared with the other folk terms: they are both parts of the *main working deck*.

One of the most important skills required by ethnography is the ability to see similarities among symbols in the way informants see them. Every ethnographer should practice looking for similarities. One should place folk terms side by side and ask, "Is there any way these appear similar?" We can inspect domains in the same way, looking for all possible similarities. The decision as to whether symbols are really similar in some way must be made by our informants or inferred from the way they behave towards these symbols. But coming up with possible similarities gives the ethnographer hypotheses to test.

Although we have focused on similarities in both domain and taxonomic analysis, similarity always implies contrast. Every domain has a boundary; when we discover that some folk terms belong inside that boundary because of similarity, we also discover others belong outside because of differences. Similarity and contrast are two sides to the same coin. Up to now our emphasis has been on the similarity principle; in the rest of this chapter and the next we will turn to discovery procedures based on the principle of contrast.

The Contrast Principle

This principle states that *the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it is different from other symbols*. This principle is based on

the fact that the meaning of any folk term depends on what it does not mean. Whenever we use language we call attention to what things *are*; but we also call attention to what they *are not*. To say, "I'm holding a book," identifies an object in my hand. It also implies that I am not holding a tree, a magazine, a wallet, a house, or anything else that we could communicate about. To say, "A boy is riding the bicycle," implies that it is not a girl, not a woman, not a chimpanzee, and not anything else. Whenever we talk we convey meaning by these implicit contrasts.

For practical purposes of field work it is useful to distinguish two kinds of semantic contrast: *unrestricted* and *restricted*.² Unrestricted contrast refers to the fact that a particular folk term contrasts with all other folk terms in the language. *Boy*, for example, contrasts with *girl*, *chimpanzee*, *house*, *Augustus Caesar*, *hydrogen bomb*, and any other folk term that can be used in a referential way. These are all unrestricted contrasts or differences. Some, such as between *hydrogen bomb* and *boy*, are so great that we can hardly find any similarity between them. This degree of difference operates constantly in all languages, but it is so great that it holds little use in our search for meaning.

For ethnographic purposes, folk terms in *restricted contrast* contain a gold mine of cultural meaning. Restricted contrast means that a folk term belongs to a set of terms which are both alike and different. The contrast is *restricted* to a limited amount of semantic information. It is easy to recognize, for example, that although *boy*, *girl*, *woman*, *man*, *adult*, and *young man* are all different, they all share important similarities. They share the semantic information of being human beings at different stages of development and of different sex. In a very important way, the meaning of *boy* depends on the fact that it is in restricted contrast with *girl*, *woman*, *adult*, and *young man*. When someone says, "A boy is riding a bicycle," it is implied (to those inside the culture) that a *not-girl*, a *not-woman*, a *not-man*, and a *not-young man* is riding the bicycle. All of us learn the symbols of our culture in sets that are in restricted contrast. When we hear the term *boy*, for example, we fill in the implied contrast and derive the meaning of boy without thinking.

Contrast sets always operate in the background of human communication.³ At the tacit level of awareness, these groups of symbols enable us to interpret instantly the meanings of our culture. Consider the following exchange:

"Boy, it's a hot day, Grandpa," said John.

"Oh, Johnny, when you're a man like me, instead of a boy, you'll not think it's hot. It's not too hot for me to go out with the boys tonight."

Although the word *boy* appears three different times in this exchange, it has three different symbolic meanings that no reader can miss. How do we interpret these meanings? In part, by making immediate reference to the contrast sets each usage of the word *boy* belongs to. Each contrast set

implies a structural question, as we can see by examining these three uses of *boy*.

1. What are some other exclamations you might use when saying it's very hot? Gee, wow, man, whew, etc.
2. What are some other stages in a person's life besides boy and man? Baby, child, little boy, big boy, adult, old man, etc.
3. What are some other ways you would refer to your friends besides *the boys*? Friends, colleagues, old geezers, our group, etc.

The differences in meaning then depend on membership in different contrast sets.

The ethnographer who is a stranger to a culture faces a formidable task: to find the appropriate contrast sets for interpreting the meaning of symbols. Consider an example from the culture of tramps. An informant points to another man and says, "John is a *mission stiff*." He goes on to explain that a mission stiff is someone who hangs around skid row missions, perhaps sleeps there frequently, and may even work at the mission. My informant fully appreciates the meaning of mission stiff because he implicitly contrasts it with a set of terms with which *mission stiff* is in restricted contrast. As an outsider I do not know the contrast set this term belongs to. Although my informant tells me something of its meaning, his explanation barely scratches the surface. In order to uncover the meaning of this symbol I must first find out how it is *different from* the other terms in some contrast set. *Mission stiff*, it turns out, is one kind of tramp and belongs to a contrast set of more than fifteen other kinds of tramps. Before I can fully grasp my informant's meaning of *mission stiff*, I must find out the differences between this kind of tramp and all the others. I must take the contrast principle seriously and find out how *mission stiff* is different from *bindle stiff*, *airdale*, *home guard tramp*, and all the other kinds of tramps.

Let's consider the principle of contrast in one other example. I interviewed a kindergarten student about the culture of her school. She described typical days and various activities that took place in class. She used symbols like *rig-a-jigs*, *train*, and *science table*. My first task in discovering their meaning was to locate the contrast set to which they belonged. It turned out that to my informant they were all kinds of *work*, a contrast set of nearly twenty folk terms. Now I could proceed to search for the ways in which all these kinds of work were different. My informant easily responded to my questions to tell me that *rig-a-jigs* was work usually done by girls; both *train* and *science table* were usually done by boys. Furthermore, you sat down to do *rig-a-jigs* but stood up with the other two kinds of work. Slowly, through searching out these differences, I began to grasp what each kind of work meant to my informant.

Each domain of a culture consists of folk terms in restricted contrast. Each subset of terms within a domain (the parts of a taxonomy) consists of a contrast set. One of the reasons that domain analysis and taxonomic analysis are so important is that they yield numerous sets of terms in restricted contrast; these sets can now be used to search for the kinds of differences that reveal symbolic meaning.

There are two major ways to search for differences among folk terms in restricted contrast. First, you can review all field notes looking for informants' statements which suggest differences. For example, in one interview a tramp informant began to discuss mission stiffs, saying they seldom rode freight trains like certain other tramps, but instead they traveled from one place to another by public transportation. Also, they didn't travel from one job to another but from one mission to another. Implied in these comments were several differences with other tramps which shed light on the meaning of *mission stiff*. It is important to look at all past interviews. These interviews contain a rich mine of information about semantic contrasts which define folk terms.

The second way to search for differences among folk terms is to ask contrast questions. These are the third major type of ethnographic question presented in this book. Each type of contrast question is designed to elicit differences among the folk terms in a contrast set. As you will see in using them, contrast questions are powerful tools for discovering many tacit relationships among the folk terms you have collected from informants. In the remainder of this chapter I want to identify the different kinds of contrast questions.

CONTRAST QUESTIONS

There are seven different types of contrast questions (Figure 9.1). With literate informants, folk terms written on cards and placed in front of the informant facilitate the question-and-answer process. I almost always use cards when asking any kind of contrast question. In the examples which follow I will make many references to the use of cards. One of their greatest values lies in the fact that they enable the informant to sit and think about

FIGURE 9.1 Kinds of Contrast Questions

- 1. Contrast verification questions
- 2. Directed contrast questions
- 3. Dyadic contrast questions
- 4. Triadic contrast questions
- 5. Contrast set sorting questions
- 6. Twenty Questions game
- 7. Rating questions

differences while keeping in mind many different folk terms. Cards can be grouped quickly into twos and threes on the basis of contrasting characteristics, then regrouped again. With nonliterate informants pictures drawn on cards or actual photographs serve the same purpose. However, some informants feel intimidated by cards, equating the contrast questions with some form of testing. For this reason it is best to introduce cards slowly, explain their use clearly, and perhaps ask contrast questions without cards to begin with.

In asking contrast questions the same principles apply that I discussed in Step Seven for asking structural questions. You may want to review the discussion of these principles, which I only restate here:

- 1. Concurrent principle: Ask contrast questions concurrently with both descriptive questions and structural questions.
- 2. Explanation principle: Contrast questions often require an explanation.
- 3. Repetition principle: Contrast questions must be repeated with the same terms to elicit all the differences.
- 4. Context principle: When asking contrast questions, provide the informant with contextual information.
- 5. Cultural framework principle: Phrase contrast questions in cultural as well as personal terms.

1. Contrast Verification Questions

This type of question can only be formulated after discovering some difference between two folk terms. Then this difference is presented to an informant with a request to confirm or disconfirm the difference. Let's say you have spent many hours interviewing the vice-president of a corporation that produces food. In reviewing your field notes in search of contrasts for the contrast set *types of decisions*, you come across the following statement:

Well, I have to make a lot of different decisions. In fact, that's my job, making decisions. For example, I had to make a staffing decision this week, so I had to check with the executive committee. And this afternoon I need to make four or five packaging decisions on those breakfast cereals. I don't need to meet with the executive committee on that but I'll probably ask advice from several staff people.

In another interview you elicited more than sixteen kinds of decisions that your informant has to make and so *staffing decision* and *packaging decision* are familiar terms to you. But now you notice a contrast: one requires checking with the executive committee; the other does not. On the basis of this you formulate a contrast verification question:

I'm interested in the differences among all the kinds of decisions you have to make in

the course of your work. In looking over some of our earlier conversations I came across some differences that I'd like to double check with you. Would you say that a staffing decision has to be checked with the executive committee, but that a packaging decision does not?

Contrast verification questions can frequently confirm differences and similarities among a large group of folk terms. In studying the meaning of *flop* with tramp informants I worked with a large stack of cards. I had established numerous differences through interviews and going over field notes but needed to verify these with other informants. One important difference that emerged was whether you could lie down in a particular flop or whether you had to sit up and sleep. I would present an informant with two stacks of cards on which the names of various flops occurred. I had tentatively established that one stack were all flops where you could lie down and sleep, the other stack were flops where you would have to sit up. "Can you tell me if all these flops are places you can lie down?" I would ask, pointing to the first pile.

My informant would quickly look through the cards, perhaps setting one or another card aside with a comment like, "There you have to sit up" or "I don't know about this one." Then I would point to the other stack of cards and say, "Can you tell me if all these flops are places you must sit up?"

Another way to ask contrast verification questions has to do with multiple contrasts. In studying *mission flops* I discovered that one important difference had to do with the number of nights a person could *consecutively* sleep there. Three differences emerged: (1) one night a month, (2) three nights a month, and (3) every night of the year. I went through all the specific mission flops (such as the Sally, Bread of Life Mission, Holy Cross Mission, etc.) and identified the number of nights for each the best I could. If I wasn't sure I would simply place a card in one of the three stacks randomly, knowing that my informant would correct me if it was wrong. Then, during an interview, I would set three stacks of cards before an informant and say something like

All of these are mission flops, but here are places you can flop one night a month (pointing to the first stack). This second group are missions you can flop at three nights a month, and the last one are places you can flop every night of the year. Could you look through and see if I have them right?

In asking verification questions, as well as each of the other types, new contrasts always emerge. Halfway through a stack like *mission flops* where you can only flop one night a month an informant may say, "Not only can you only flop there one night a month, but you have to take a nosedive if you want a flop." This immediately leads me to ask the next type of contrast question, one that is combined with all the other types.⁴

2. Directed Contrast Questions

A directed contrast question begins with a known characteristic of one folk term in a contrast set and asks if any other terms contrast on that characteristic. Take the previous example. If an informant casually points out that a *nosedive* is required in a particular mission flop, without even knowing anything about *nosedives*, I can ask a directed contrast question like the following:

Could you look through all the other mission flops and tell me which ones require you to take a *nosedive* in order to get a flop and which ones do not?

And so my informant looks through each of the cards and sorts them into flops requiring a *nosedive* and those which do not. Near the end, another casual comment occurs: "Well, this one, the Pacific Garden in Chicago, they don't require a nosedive but you got to take an earbanging." Immediately I would move on to another directed contrast question, this time without using the cards:

Oh, so in some mission flops you have to take an earbanging? Let me read off this list of mission flops and could you tell me for each one whether you have to take an earbanging? How about Holy Cross? Bread of Life? Sally? etc.

Much later I discover that a *nosedive* involves going to the front of the mission chapel after a service and praying, perhaps expressing sorrow for one's condition and at least pretending to turn over a new leaf. To take an *earbanging* means that you must sit through a religious sermon or you will not be able to sleep at the mission that night.

Directed contrast questions can also arise from one's field notes. Let's say that while reviewing my notes I come across the following statement about couples, one kind of customer at Brady's Bar: "Couples almost always sit in the upper section at the back." This immediately raises a question in my mind: "Are other customers the same or different from couples?" So, during the next interview I ask a question like the following:

One time earlier you mentioned that couples always sit in the back of the upper section. Do real regulars sit there also? Do loners? Do drunks? etc.

And my informant will almost always tell me where these people usually sit, how they contrast with the customary behavior of couples.

Keep in mind the fundamental rule in using all contrast questions: *ask for contrasts among members of the same contrast set*. In each of the previous examples the folk terms were always drawn from the same contrast set. Some were domains: *kinds of decision*, *kinds of flops*, *kinds of customers*.

One contrast set (*mission flops*) was a large category in the taxonomy *kinds of flops*.

3. Dyadic Contrast Questions

This type of contrast question, as well as all the remaining ones, differ in an important way from the first two. The ethnographer asks the question *without having any differences to suggest to the informant*. You merely ask informants to identify any difference they can see between folk terms. Informants are then free to reveal contrasts that are meaningful to them. Some that the investigator would not think of. This strategy leads to discovering contrasts known and used by informants rather than imposing contrasts thought relevant by the ethnographer. At every point in the ethnographic process our goal is to describe the culture *in its own terms*. Looking back over this process we can identify at least the following points where the ethnographer must choose to discover informant's terms or impose the analytic categories of social science.

1. Formulating questions in native terms or outsider terms.
2. Identifying domains in native terms or using imposed categories from social science.
3. Identifying the taxonomic structure of domains in native terms or imposing an alien structure from social science to organize the domain.
4. Identifying contrasts in native terms or seeking those of interest to an outsider.

Dyadic contrast questions present informants with two folk terms and ask, "Can you tell me any differences between these terms?" For example, here is a typical exchange between an ethnographer and informant that uses a dyadic contrast question:

ETHNOGRAPHER: Bulls seem to be pretty important to most tramps, would you agree?
 INFORMANT: Hell yes! Why, every tramp is on the lookout for bulls most of the time.
 ETHNOGRAPHER: I've been trying to find out all the different kinds of bulls that tramps usually recognize. Here are the ones I've found so far (spreads more than a dozen cards in front of the informant with each type written on a different card).
 INFORMANT: Yeah, I know all those. One you don't have here is *ragpicker*, they're a kind of bull. (Ethnographer quickly writes this folk term on a new card.)
 ETHNOGRAPHER: Now, I'm interested in the differences among all these kinds of bulls. Let's begin with these two: *ragpicker* and *turnkey*. (Ethnographer picks up all the remaining cards, leaving the two in front of the informant.) Can you tell me any differences between a *ragpicker* and *turnkey*?
 INFORMANT: Sure, a *ragpicker* is dressed like a tramp and a *turnkey* always wears a uniform.

Dyadic contrast questions such as this will elicit contrasts between all the other folk terms in the contrast set *kinds of bulls*. I would prepare a list of all the kinds, then work my way through every possible combined *pair* with questions like the following:

1. Do you see any difference between *ragpicker* and *flyboy*?
2. Do you see any differences between a *flyboy* and a *turnkey*?
3. What are the differences between a *flyboy* and a *beat bull*?
4. What are the differences between a *beat bull* and *ragpicker*?

Some of these questions ask for a single difference, others ask for multiple differences. Sometimes I will repeat a question after my informant has responded with contrasts. For example:

ETHNOGRAPHER: Do you see any difference between a *ragpicker* and a *flyboy*?
 INFORMANT: Sure, a *flyboy* is riding a motorcycle and a *ragpicker* is always walking.
 ETHNOGRAPHER: Can you think of any other differences between a *flyboy* and a *ragpicker*?
 INFORMANT: Sure, a *ragpicker* will try to trap you by getting you to beg from them. Like they'll come up and say, "How much you holdin' on a jug?" When you say, "Thirty cents," they'll hold out some change, like they're offering it to you. Then you take some, cause they're offering it and you're trying to make a jug, and then they show you their badge and bust ass. Now a *flyboy* will never do that. He might pinch you for drunk and call a paddy wagon, but he won't trap you.
 ETHNOGRAPHER: Can you think of any other differences between a *flyboy* and a *ragpicker*?
 INFORMANT: Well, a *ragpicker* dresses in tramp's clothes and a *flyboy* wears a uniform.

4. Triadic Contrast Questions⁴

This type of question presents an informant with three folk terms and asks, "Which two of these are alike and which one is different from the others?" This procedure makes explicit recognition of the fact that differences always imply similarities. This is one of the most effective types of contrast questions.

With some informants, triadic contrast questions will require an explanation or even an example. Here is a typical explanation and question I would use when beginning with this type of contrast question.

ETHNOGRAPHER: You have told me about nearly all the different kinds of drinks that you serve in Brady's Bar. Now, I'd like to ask you a different kind of question, one that has to do with the differences among drinks.
 INFORMANT: O.K. I'll try to answer the best I know how.
 ETHNOGRAPHER: Let me start with an example of the kind of question I want to ask.

If I were to show you these three books and ask you, "Which two are alike and which one is different," you would probably say something like this, "These two are alike; they are both paperback; this one is different because it isn't a paperback." Or take another example. If I asked you about three people who work at Brady's Bar, Joe, Molly, and Sharon, and I asked which two were alike and which one was different, you could say, "Molly and Sharon are alike; they are both female, and Joe is male." Now, I want to ask you about kinds of drinks in this way. Is that clear?

INFORMANT: Well, sort of, but I'm not sure.

ETHNOGRAPHER: O.K. It will become clear as we go along. Here are three kinds of drinks, a *gin and tonic*, a *scotch and soda*, and a *Brandy Seven*. Now, can you tell me which two of these are alike and which one is different?

INFORMANT: Sure, a gin and tonic and a scotch and soda are both *fizz* and a Brandy Seven is *bubbly*.

With both triadic contrast questions and dyadic contrast questions the ethnographer can follow up each response with a directed contrast question. For example, the last example resulted in two contrasts that waitresses use to distinguish drinks: some are fizzy and some are bubbly. It turns out that this information is extremely important to a waitress. Brady's Bar is dark and noisy; when bartenders mix drinks they do not point to each drink as they pass it to the waitress and say, "This is a Brandy Seven and this is a scotch and soda." The waitress must learn the cues for distinguishing drinks at the bar and again when she reaches the customer's table. If she gives customers the wrong drinks she will have to retrace her steps: it will upset the bartender, and the customer will probably not tip her. One cue for distinguishing drinks is whether they are *bubbly* or *fizz*. Now with this information I could ask the following directed contrast question: "Now, let's go down this list of all the other drinks and as I read them off, can you tell me which ones are bubbly and which ones are fizzy?" A typical response almost always leads to more contrasts:

ETHNOGRAPHER: Rusty Nail.

INFORMANT: Bubbly.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Vodka Gimlet.

INFORMANT: That's not bubbly or fizzy.

ETHNOGRAPHER: What is it?

INFORMANT: Well, it's cloudy. That's how I would tell it from the other drinks on my tray.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Gin Gimlet.

INFORMANT: That's cloudy too.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Calvert's and Water.

INFORMANT: That's clear.

And so I would work through the entire list of drinks until I could tell the cue for each one, whether bubbly, fizzy, cloudy, clear, or whatever. The direct-

ed contrast question has enabled me to discover other drinks that were fizzy or bubbly; it also led to the discovery of new contrasts.

Sometimes triadic contrast questions (as well as some other contrast questions) will elicit what I call the *test question response*. This response is so frequent and so detrimental to ethnographic research that every ethnographer must be alerted to its possibility. Let me give an example of the test question response. I began studying skid row men out of an interest in alcoholism. I wanted to find out why these men drank as they did. But soon I realized that drinking was not the most important thing to informants. They were far more concerned with making a flop, strategies for coping with the police, staying out of jail, and traveling. Then I came across the term *tramp*, the major identity category used by these men when out of jail. I began investigating this folk term, eliciting all the different kinds of tramps. When I asked the first contrast questions, many informants answered with the *test question response*. Here is a typical encounter.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Here are three kinds of tramps, a bindle stuf, an airdale, and a home guard tramp. Which two of these are alike and which one is different?

INFORMANT: What do you mean alike or different?

These informants sometimes asked this question in other ways, like "What kind of difference do you want?" or "Different in what way?" All these responses were asking me to give them some information that I wanted to know about these three kinds of tramps.

The great hazard of the test question response is that the ethnographer may actually respond with information. Because I was interested in drinking behavior, I was tempted to say, "Well, which of these tramps drink the most and which drinks less?" or "Which do you think have the most serious drinking problem, and which one has the less serious drinking problem?" It also crossed my mind to ask for differences about the marital status and educational background of these tramps. But all of these questions would have given informants contrasts primarily relevant to an outsider. In a very subtle way, these questions would have imposed my interests onto the folk terms used by tramps. Informants would have tried to give their opinions in response to each of these questions.

In responding to the *test question response* the ethnographer should place the responsibility for making contrasts in the hands of the informant. Here are some ways I usually respond to questions about what contrasts or differences I am interested in:

1. Well, I mean alike or different in any way that you can think of.
2. I'd like to know any differences that you think are important to most tramps.
3. I'm sure there are many ways that these three kinds of tramps are

different, but I'm interested in the ways that tramps see these differences. Can you think of two that are alike and one that is different in some way that is important to you?"

Informants almost always relax and begin to give contrasts freely and eagerly when they are given a response such as these. They have been reassured that the contrast question is not a test, that the ethnographer still wants to know the culture from their point of view, that they are the experts and ethnographer is the learner. Whenever informants offer a test question and response, I take it as an opportunity to reaffirm the fact that I want them to teach me the meaning of their symbols. When used in this way, the test question response from informants can enhance the work of ethnography.

5. Contrast Set Sorting Questions

This type of question makes use of all the terms in a contrast set at the same time. The ethnographer writes each folk term on a card ahead of time. The cards are then presented to the informant with a simple instruction: "Would you sort these into two or more piles in terms of how they are alike or different?" Here is an example of a contrast set sorting question with a four-year-old informant about the work done in kindergarten.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Last time we talked you told me about a lot of different kinds of work you do at school. Do you do work everyday?

INFORMANT: Oh yes, like today we did big blocks and clay most of the morning. ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, here are some cards. I have pasted or drawn pictures on each one that represents each kind of work you do. This one is for *inker toys*, this crayon is for *coloring*, and so on. Can you recognize all these kinds of work?

INFORMANT: (going through all the cards) Oh, yes. That's *lamin*, and that's *strum*, etc. ETHNOGRAPHER: Now, I'd like to play a little game together. I want you to place these cards in different piles. But first you have to think about the cards and put the same ones together in one pile that are alike, and then others in another pile that are alike, and other ones in still another pile. You can make only two piles or as many piles as you want. OK?

INFORMANT: Sure, that's easy. (She begins sorting the cards into piles, stopping occasionally to move a card from one pile to another.) OK, I'm done.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Now, can you tell me why you put these cards in this pile? (Points to the first pile.)

INFORMANT: Sure, all these kinds of work are ones that both boys and girls do, but mostly the boys do them. And this second pile is ones that both boys and girls do but mostly girls do them. This last pile is one that only girls do, that's *paper dolls*.

I would then place all the cards together in a single pile and ask the same question over again: "Can you place these in two or more piles in terms of some way that the cards are alike and different?" After the first two or three

times, it is sufficient to say merely, "OK, that's great, now let's do it again, only put them in different piles this time." Sometimes it will take more than ten different sorting exercises to exhaust the contrasts that an informant knows or can recall.

Frequently an informant will give a test question response such as: "What kind of piles do you want me to make?" And as with the triadic sorting question, the ethnographer merely states that any way the informant thinks is important or any way that the informant can think of is appropriate.

6. Twenty Questions Game

Perhaps you have played the game of "Twenty Questions," in which one person thinks of an object and others try to guess that object by asking twenty questions. If the object cannot be discovered in twenty questions the person who thought of the object wins. Sometimes this game is referred to as "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral," because some rules require that the object thought of be labeled as an animal, vegetable, or mineral for a beginning clue. The main rule underlying this game is that the questioners must only ask questions that can be answered yes or no.

In adapting the Twenty Questions game to ethnography, instead of saying animal, vegetable, or mineral (which are simply large domains in our cultural knowledge), the ethnographer selects a single contrast set and picks one folk term from that. The informant is told which contrast set the folk term comes from, but not the folk term itself. The task placed before the informant is to ask yes and no questions of the ethnographer until the informant can guess which term the ethnographer is thinking of.

This game reveals the hidden contrasts that underlie a contrast set. In the course of playing the game the ethnographer discovers the appropriate questions that informants would ask about all the folk terms in the set. As you can see from the following example, the ethnographer must still ask some questions during the course of the game. This example comes from an actual game played with an elderly tramp who had spent many years in the Seattle City Jail. I placed before him sixteen folk terms, all of which referred to the different kinds of trustees in the jail. These are the terms:

ranger	odlin's man	garage man
georgetown man	city hall man	harbor patrol man
wallingford man	floor man	clerk
bull cook	court usher	hospital orderly
blue room man	kitchen man	runner
barber		

The questions and answers went something like this:

ETHNOGRAPHER: I'd like you to ask me questions to see if you can guess which of these terms I'm thinking of. You can only ask questions that I can answer yes or no. You can't simply point to a card and say, "Is it this one?"

INFORMANT: OK. Are you thinking of an outside trusty?

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, before I can answer that, will you tell me which trusties are outside trusties?

INFORMANT: Sure, these (he picks up all the terms which are outside trusties and shows them to me).

ETHNOGRAPHER: (While writing down which terms are outside trusties.) No, it isn't an outside trusty, can you ask me another question?

INFORMANT: Is it a trusty who works on the first floor of the jail?

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, before I can answer that, you will have to tell me which ones work on the first floor of the jail.

INFORMANT: Well, it's only the kitchen men. All the others work somewhere else.

ETHNOGRAPHER: No, the one I'm thinking of doesn't work on the first floor of the jail.

Can you ask me another question?

INFORMANT: Does the one you're thinking of work mostly with bulls or also with inmates and civilians?

ETHNOGRAPHER: Before I can answer that, you will have to tell me which ones work mostly with bulls.

INFORMANT: The ranger, odlin's man, garage man, georgetown man, harbor patrol man, wallingford man, blue room man, and clerk.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Yes, he works mostly with bulls.

INFORMANT: Well, then it must be the blue room man or the clerk.

ETHNOGRAPHER: How do you know?

INFORMANT: Because you said it wasn't an outside man, and they are the only ones who work mostly with bulls and are not outside men.

ETHNOGRAPHER: O.K., it's one of those two, but can you ask me a question to find out?

INFORMANT: Does the one you're thinking of work mostly with food?

ETHNOGRAPHER: Which ones work mostly with food?

INFORMANT: Of these two, only the Blue room man.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Yes, the one I'm thinking of works mostly with food.

INFORMANT: Then it has to be the blue room man.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Right. Now, let's start again. I'm thinking of a different trusty. Can you ask me questions, this time different questions, to see if you can guess?

This game works especially well with young informants but can be used with those of any age. After a few times through most informants will begin to generate many different questions, thus revealing the underlying contrasts they use to code a set of folk terms such as this.

7. Rating Questions

Rating questions seek to discover the values placed on sets of symbols. They ask informants to make contrasts on the basis of which folk terms are best, easiest, most difficult, worst, most interesting, most desirable, most

undesirable, or any other rating criteria. Many times a rating question must be asked in the form of a directed contrast question which gives the informant one contrast, then asks for others.

All the other contrast questions, will, on occasion, yield evaluations and ratings. However, due to the importance of finding out the values that people attach to the symbols of a culture, I have identified this as a distinct question. After eliciting many different contrasts from my kindergarten informant about the types of work, I introduced a rating question such as, "Which type of work do you like the best?" or "Which types of work would you like to do first, which ones next, and which ones last?"

The ethnographer must be alert to folk terms that refer to rating scales. Tramps would refer to one or another trusty job as "shitty," "soft job," and "worse than lockup." These terms then became the basis for asking them to rate all the trusty jobs. Informants can often create their own scales. Thus, instead of merely saying that some trusty jobs are "soft jobs" and others are not, they would place them in rank order from the least soft to the most soft. Sometimes each job would appear in a separate category or degree of "softness," and sometimes several would appear together as the same degree of softness. When this set of contrasts was compared with ratings about the degree of difficulty of the job, many new insights about the culture emerged.

I began this step by identifying four *discovery principles* used in the study of cultural meaning systems. One of these, the *contrast principle*, was discussed in detail. It states that the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it contrasts with other symbols. I presented seven different types of contrast questions, each designed to elicit differences among folk terms which belong to the same contrast set. These questions can also be used with nonverbal symbols to discover differences. For example, an ethnographer could present an informant with items of clothing, tools, paintings, or any other artifact to elicit contrasts with the seven questions.

At the same time, I want to stress that it is possible to discover many of the contrasts implicit in a culture without ever asking a single question. Through participant observation with tramps, I am certain one could eventually find out all the differences among kinds of flops or kinds of trusties. However, this would take a very long time and require that the ethnographer visit more than one hundred types of flops. But contrasts can also be discovered from interview data without asking contrast questions. By searching for statements made about a set of symbols in restricted contrast it is possible to distinguish them. The contrast questions are tools which enable the ethnographer to discover contrasts, both tacit and explicit, with great ease. However, the same tool is not always useful with every informant; neither is it necessary to use all these tools to discover contrasts. I have presented a range of questions so that you can draw on those that work

best with each particular informant. I have known some ethnographers, for example, who found it best not to use any contrast questions in a direct, formal manner. Throughout their descriptive interviews they would casually ask for differences, but never call attention to what they were doing.

The various differences which emerge from contrast questions and from reviewing field notes have been called by various names, including dimensions of contrast, attributes, and components of meaning. This last term has given rise to a method of analysis called *componential analysis* that we will discuss in the next step. Componential analysis will enable you to take all the contrasts you have discovered, organize them in a systematic fashion, identify missing contrasts, and represent the components of meaning for any contrast set.

TASKS

- 9.1 Review your field notes and search for contrasts that distinguish folk terms in one or more contrast sets you have already identified.
- 9.2 Formulate contrast questions of each type presented in this step for one or more contrast sets.
- 9.3 Conduct an interview in which you use descriptive, structural, and contrast questions.